

**BAA BAA
BLACK SHEEP
HAVE YOU ANY
WORDS?**



**Lea
Yassie**

BAA BAA, BLACK SHEEP,

**HAVE YOU ANY
WORDS?**

by

Lea Tassie

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Author photo: Lynn Arnold

Muchos gracias y abrazos y besos a mi editora, Leanne Taylor.

“English can be weird. It may be understood through tough thorough thought, though.”
(Anonymous)

For Kim Mark-Goldsworthy

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ABRACADABRA

A word used in stage magic tricks, the implication being that a mysterious power is being summoned to perform the magic. Now that we can look up how to perform almost any magic stunt, we don't seriously believe in magic. However, that was not the case in ages past.

The origin of the word is unknown. One theory suggests that it originated in the second century CE with the Roman sage, Serenus Sammonicus, who wrote a book called *Liber Medicinalis*. His prescription for malaria sufferers was to wear an amulet containing the word "abracadabra" written in the form of a triangle. The Romans did not connect malaria with the mosquito bite but considered the disease to come from "bad air" caused by demons.

Medieval people believed that any event they couldn't explain was some form of enchantment. They used the incantation "abracadabra" to ward off such bewitchment and to cure poor health. The charm was also written out on paper and worn in an amulet or sewn into clothing.

The belief that "abracadabra" contained powerful magic lasted well into the 1700s. In his *Journal of the Plague Year*, 1722, Daniel Defoe bemoaned the superstition of the populace when faced with the threat of plague: "*People deceiv'd; and this was in wearing Charms, Philters, Exorcisms, Amulets, and I know not what Preparations, to fortify the Body ... against the Plague; as if the Plague was but a kind of a Possession of an evil Spirit; and that it was to be kept off with Crossings, Signs of the Zodiac, Papers tied up with so many Knots; and certain Words, or Figures written on them, as particularly the Word Abracadabra, form'd in Triangle, or Pyramid How the poor People found the Insufficiency of those things, and how many of them were afterwards carried away in the Dead-Carts.*"

By the 1800s, the word had come to mean "fake magic," spawning terms like "legal abracadabra" to denote the flummoxing of juries by fast-talking lawyers. In the early 1800s, stage conjurers adopted it as a "magic" word to use in their acts.

Author J. K. Rowling created, in the Harry Potter books, the killing curse "avada kedavra." Though it sounds like abracadabra, she adapted it from an Aramaic word.

ACHILLES HEEL

The phrase "Achilles heel" means a person's weak point, either physical or emotional. Such a vulnerability, despite overall strength, often leads to the person's downfall.

In Greek mythology, it was foretold that Achilles would die young. To prevent his death, his mother, Thetis, took baby Achilles to the River Styx, which was supposed to offer powers of invulnerability. She dipped his body into the water but because Thetis held Achilles by the heel, his heel was not covered by the water of the magical river.

As a man, Achilles survived many great battles. But, in the myths surrounding the war described in the Iliad, he was said to have died from an arrow wound to his heel. This led to the tendon at the back of a human heel being named the Achilles' tendon, circa 1693.

Another myth is that Thetis treated him with ambrosia and burned away his mortality in the hearth fire except on the heel, by which she held him. Peleus, his father, discovered the treatment and was alarmed to see Thetis holding the baby in the flames. His alarm offended Thetis and made her leave the treatment incomplete.

My Achilles heel is food. If my mother dunked me in the Styx, she held me by the tongue!

ACID TEST

This is a foolproof, conclusive test of success or value, or that which proves a hypothesis or the validity of an idea. "The product looks great, but will people buy it? That's the acid test."

The origin of the phrase was a chemical test to prove the purity of gold, which was necessary to allow prospectors and dealers to distinguish gold from base metal. Developed in the late 1700s, it used nitric acid, which dissolves other metals much more readily than gold. The amount of metal dissolved proved the pureness of the gold. The figurative use started around the mid-1800s.

The phrase was used in the 1960s for something entirely different. Ken Kesey and his *Merry Pranksters* held "Acid Test" parties in San Francisco. Those attending were serenaded by *The Grateful Dead* and given drinks of Kool-Aid (originally called "Fruit Smack") spiked with LSD, known as "acid." Which was being tested: the quality of the LSD or the tolerance of the guests?

A FEATHER IN YOUR CAP

A symbol of honor and achievement in several cultures. Richard Hansard recorded it in his *Description of Hungary*, 1599: "It hath been an antient custom among them [Hungarians] that none should wear a fether but he who had killed a Turk." Many North American tribes also traditionally added a feather to the head-dress of a warrior who killed an enemy.

The most familiar use of the phrase is in the children's rhyme *Yankee Doodle*:

Yankee Doodle went to town,
Riding on a pony.
He stuck a feather in his cap,
And called it macaroni.

This version may have originated with the British forces in the American War of Independence, to mock the revolutionary militia. "Doodle" was 1700s British slang for fool and "macaroni" was slang for a dandy or fop. The latter originated with the Macaroni Club, a group of London aesthetes who showed a preference for foreign cuisine to prove their sophistication. But times change. The North American craze for mac 'n cheese has ended regard of macaroni as foreign cuisine.

In the highlands of Scotland and Wales, it is still usual for the hunter who kills the first woodcock to pluck out a feather and stick it in his cap.

A FINE KETTLE OF FISH

A troublesome situation or a muddle. The phrase refers to the long, oval, metal saucepans that have been used for centuries to poach whole salmon and are known as fish-kettles. A fish kettle has a handle on each side and a lid and, often, a removable rack inside. The rack allows a whole fish to be cooked in heated or boiling water or in steam and then easily lifted out of the kettle.

There is no obvious reason why such a piece of kitchen equipment was chosen to denote “muddle or mess.” Perhaps it’s an allusion to the muddle of bones, head, and skin left in fish-kettles after the fish has been eaten.

The earliest instance of the term in print is in Thomas Newte’s *A Tour in England and Scotland* in 1785: “It is customary for the gentlemen who live near the Tweed to entertain their neighbours and friends with a Fete Champetre, which they call giving ‘a kettle of fish.’ Tents are pitched near the banks of the river, a fire is kindled, and live salmon thrown into boiling kettles.”

The phrase is explained in Francis Grose’s *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, 1811: “When a person has perplexed his affairs in general, or any particular business, he is said to have made a fine kettle of fish of it.”

“A different kettle of fish” means the same thing as the North American term “a whole new ball game.” This expression dates from the late 1800s and was found most commonly in Scotland and the north of England.

A FLY IN THE OINTMENT

A minor irritation that spoils the success or enjoyment of something, especially a flaw that wasn’t at first apparent. “We had a cookstove, beans, and plates; the fly in the ointment was the lack of a can opener.” It can also imply a hidden flaw. “This is too perfect. There has to be a catch somewhere!”

Ecclesiastes 10:1 says this: “Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savor.” No one seemed concerned about the fly contaminating a pot of goo.

The idiom appeared first in English in the early 1700s, in the book *A Practical Treatise Concerning Humility* by John Norris.

A GOOD EGG

In the 1800s, “bad egg” was British public-school slang for someone nasty. This led, fifty years later, to “good egg” being used to describe a good person.

The phrase originated with chicken eggs. Eggshells are just the surface of the egg, the same as

first impressions of people are largely based on surface details. These days, because of regulations, one rarely cracks an egg open to find that it's rotten, but this used to be a common experience. So, when a person who seemed at first sight to be good, but turned out to be nasty, it was natural enough to call that person a "bad egg," while someone who proved to be honest and helpful was a "good egg."

PG Wodehouse did much to popularize the phrase. He used it first in *Something Fresh* in 1915. Rudyard Kipling also used it in his book *Traffics and Discoveries* in 1904.

Then there's the phrase "curate's egg." The term refers to something that is obviously bad but is euphemistically described as nonetheless having good features. In 1895, a cartoon in the humorous British magazine *Punch* pictures a timid-looking curate eating a boiled egg for breakfast in his bishop's house. The bishop says: "I'm afraid you've got a bad egg, Mr. Jones." The curate, desperate not to offend his eminent host and ultimate employer, replies: "Oh, my Lord, I assure you that parts of it are excellent!"

Bernard Meltzer says, "A true friend is someone who thinks that you are a good egg even though he knows that you are slightly cracked."

A LOAD OF COBBLERS

This phrase is British slang for "what nonsense!" An exclamation of derision or disbelief, it began to be widely used from the 1960s.

The phrase originated as Cockney rhyming slang where "cobblers" means cobbler's awls. (An awl was essential for a shoemaker's kit, used to pierce leather so that pieces could be sewn together.) "Awls" rhymes with "balls" (testicles). The use of the rhyme allows the taboo word "balls" to be avoided. Using "cobblers" as a synonym for "balls" began in at least the 1930s.

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

This phrase describes the law of retaliation (*lex talionis*) in that the person who causes another person to suffer should suffer an equal amount.

It originated in the *Code of Hammurabi*, King of Babylon, 1792-1750 BCE. The phrase was used in the *King James Bible*: "...it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth..." In Hammurabi's code, the principle is of exact reciprocity. As an example, if a person caused the death of another person, the killer would be put to death.

In some interpretations, the injured party is the one inflicting such punishment. In Roman law, the tendency was toward monetary compensation. In cases of assault, fixed penalties were set for various injuries. The intent was to restrict compensation to the value of the loss and prevent the feuds and vendettas that threatened social life.

Lex talionis systems have been replaced by newer legal theory, but they served in the development of social systems and the establishment of a governing body whose purpose was to

enact the retaliation and ensure that this was the only punishment.

We often apply the King of Babylon's code to everyday life. Some people say revenge is bad, but there's much satisfaction in smacking the person who smacked you.

Taking such revenge is one of the basic seven plots used in fiction. Jeffrey Archer wrote a book titled *Not a Penny More, Not a Penny Less*. The protagonists had been scammed for hundreds of thousands of dollars and they recovered, by devious methods, the exact amount taken from them. It was a good and satisfying read.

ANTS IN YOUR PANTS

This means you're fidgeting or "antsy." The *Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins* says: "Originating in the late 1960s, 'antsy' means jittery, restless, or nervous. The expression derives from the earlier phrase 'to have ants in one's pants,' which dates to World War II America and seems to have first been recorded in humorist H. Allen Smith's book *Putty Knife*: 'She dilates her nostrils a lot, the way Valentino used to do it in the silent movies to indicate that he had ants in his pants.' The quotation shows that 'to have ants in one's pants' can suggest lust, but to my knowledge 'antsy' never has this sexual meaning."

Ants in Your Pants was a Canadian children's music video TV program that aired 1997 to 2004.

Ants are noted for being industrious. I hope they get the insect equivalent of coffee breaks.

ARGLE-BARGLE

"Argle" appears in the late 1500s and means to argue obstinately, to wrangle. It may be a perversion of "argue," or confusion of that word with "haggle."

"Argle-bargle" is Scottish and first appeared in 1808 in Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Tongue*. The Scots seem to have a penchant for reduplication. Other examples are: "catter-batter" (wrangle), "crinkie-winkie" (contention), "hackum-plackum" (to barter).

A quote from *Kidnapped*, by Robert Louis Stevenson (1886): "Last night ye haggled and argle-bargled like an apple-wife." An apple-wife was a seller of apples from a stall, reputed to be just as argumentative and foul-tongued as her male counterparts.

And from *Margaret Ogilvy*, by J M Barrie (1896): "Ten minutes at the least did she stand at the door argy-bargying with that man."

As far as we know, "bargy" and "bargle" never existed as independent words. They only appeared as the doubling, or reduplication, of "argy" and "argle."

Canadians also enjoy reduplication. Being namby-pamby, I'll shilly-shally in the kitchen, too wishy-washy to cook. Then zigzag to the phone and call a super-duper delivery service.

ARITHMETIC

“Arithmetic,” the elementary branch of mathematics, is the study of numbers and the traditional operations on them—addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, exponentiation, and extraction of roots.

I’ve always been curious about this word because of the pronunciation. The noun “arithmetic” is pronounced *a rith meh tic*, which seems awkward. But the adjective, as in “The problem is arithmetic,” is pronounced *ar ith met ic*, which easily rolls off my tongue.

Egyptians and Babylonians used all arithmetic operations as early as 2000 BCE. The hieroglyphic system for Egyptian numerals, like the later Roman numerals, descended from tally marks used for counting. The ancient Chinese had advanced arithmetic studies dating from the Shang Dynasty, from basic numbers to advanced algebra. They were the first to discover, understand, and apply negative numbers.

Pre-Renaissance tools used for calculations were various types of abaci. More recent tools include slide rules, nomograms, and mechanical calculators, now supplanted by electronic calculators and computers.

During the last two centuries, tools were developed to aid the manipulation of compound units, particularly in commercial applications. One example is the mechanical till, adapted in countries such as the UK to accommodate pounds, shillings, pennies, as well as farthings. Another is *Ready Reckoners*—books that catalogued the results of various routine calculations.

A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES

A person or thing that you are extremely pleased to see. It’s like saying a welcome sound is music to your ears.

“Sore eyes” refers to feelings of fear, worry, tension, or sorrow. The person or thing being viewed is a welcome sight to the beholder and brings relief from unhappy emotions.

This phrase was first recorded in *A complete collection of genteel and ingenious conversation*, by Jonathan Swift, 1738: “The Sight of you is good for sore Eyes.”

Many optometrists have a sign saying, “A Site for Sore Eyes.”

AWAY WITH THE FAIRIES

This means you’re in a dream-world, not facing reality.

This phrase came from Scots/Irish Gaelic traditional folk myths, and a belief in the existence of “the little people.” Irish folklore tells of the Sidhe, a dominant clan of fairies. The stories tell of the Sidhe appearing from some hidden place, perhaps their underground lair or from an invisible world, and spirited people away. Usually, the victim returns after what seemed like a few hours

only to find that many years have passed in the world of humans.

Medieval Europeans believed in a nether world populated by fairies, elves, pixies, leprechauns, and goblins who interacted with the real world.

Part of me wishes the Sidhe were real. Another part knows these fairies can be devious and cruel. So I'll stick to Irish whiskey, which lets me return to the real world within only hours.

QUICK BITES

ABNORMOUS — Irregular, misshapen, (1710). These days it's a humorous version of enormous. "Ginormous" falls in the same category but didn't appear until World War II in British armed forces slang. It was coined from "gigantic" and "enormous." Some dictionaries accept it as a "proper" English word, others call it slang.

ABSQUATULATE — To flee or abscond (mock-Latin word, American, 1837).

A COON'S AGE — A very long time. Here, "coon" means raccoon. Although a raccoon usually lives only 2 or 3 years, this American phrase arose in the 1800s from the mistaken belief that these animals are long-lived. "Coon" has also been used as a derogatory term for country bumpkins, and as a racial slur. The phrase may be related to the old English expression, "a crow's age."

A DAY LATE & A DOLLAR SHORT — Too little too late. Missed opportunities! (Late 1800s)

A LICK AND A PROMISE — Something being done quickly and not very well. For example, mopping up a spill on the kitchen floor instead of washing the whole thing. (1850s)

ALL THUMBS — Clumsy, awkward, uncoordinated. (1546)

A PRETTY PENNY — A considerable profit, or a large sum of money. The expression came into the language in the 1700s. George Eliot used it in her famous novel, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) in this sentence: "That watered-silk she had on cost a pretty penny."

A SHOT IN THE DARK — A hopeful attempt to hit an enemy you can't see.



— B —

BAFFLEGAB

Confusing, incomprehensible jargon, gobbledygook, or pretentious verbiage. Milton Smith coined the word when he criticized the Office of Price Stabilization for using bureaucratic language in one of its price orders.

Asked to define his word, Milton Smith said succinctly, “It is multiloquence characterized by consummate inter-fusion of circumlocution or periphrasis, inscrutability, and other familiar manifestations of abstruse expatiation commonly utilized for promulgations implementing Procrustean determinations by governmental bodies.”

BALDERDASH

Another word for nonsense, which first appeared in print in the late 1500s, and meant a frothy liquid; later, an unappetizing mixture of drinks, like milk and beer. The origin is unknown.

The *Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins* says: “The Danish *balder* (noise, clatter) has been suggested as its parent, but this derivation seems doubtful at best.”

H. L. Mencken, castigating “the general run of business and professional men” in his book *In Defense of Women*, said: “Their very capacity to master and retain such balderdash as constitutes their stock in trade is proof of their inferior mentality.”

It has also been used as a verb, meaning to adulterate. Tobias Smollett used it in his *Travels through France and Italy* in 1766 to refer to French wine: “That which is made by the peasants, both red and white, is generally genuine: but the wine-merchants of Nice brew and balderdash, and even mix it with pigeons’ dung and quick-lime.”

BALONEY

“Baloney,” also meaning “nonsense,” originated around 1894 as a spelling variant of bologna sausage (usually made from odds and ends of inferior meat), representing the popular pronunciation. It was also used in the ring, in early 1900s slang, to mean an inferior fighter.

Bologna sausage was originally exported from Bologna in Italy. It’s regarded as humble food of dubious origins. It made a good metaphor for “junk,” just as we now use “spam” to mean unwanted e-mail ads. A popular phrase in the 1930s was, “It’s baloney no matter how thin you slice it.”

Baloney is also a euphemism for “shit.” Before bullshit or even BS were widely used in semi-polite society, it was often said, “You’re full of baloney.” Or, “That’s just baloney!”

It's possible that “full of baloney” came from “full of blarney,” an Irish comment on someone quick of tongue. “Blarney,” the name of a village in Ireland, specifically means smooth flattery.

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen said, in a radio address in 1954: “Baloney is the unvarnished lie laid on so thick you hate it; blarney is flattery laid on so thin you love it.”

BARBARIAN

A person from an alien land, culture, or group believed to be inferior, uncivilized, or violent. It's used chiefly in historical references. From the 1300s, it also means a rude, brutal, cruel person.

Barbarians can be members of any nation that is judged by some to be less civilized, like a tribal society, primitive nomads, or social class (such as bandits) both within and outside one's own nation. Alternatively, they may be romanticized as noble savages.

The term originates from ancient Greece, where it was applied to all those who did not speak Greek and follow classical Greek customs. The earliest form of the word is seen in the Linear B syllabic script of Mycenaean Greece. Later, the Greeks used it as a slur against the Turks.

There was never a united barbarian group, and many of the different tribes, such as Goths, Vandals, Saxons, Huns, and Picts, shifted alliances over the years or fought alongside Roman forces against other barbarian armies.

According to Greek writers, the word was created because the language foreigners spoke sounded to Greeks like gibberish represented by the sounds “bar bar.”

A word “barbara-” is also found in the Sanskrit of ancient India, meaning to “stammer,” implying someone with an unfamiliar language. Several scholars have argued that the “barbar” in the word “barbarian” may be an attempt to imitate a stammering voice.

Greek speakers readily conflated speaking poorly with stupidity. Their attitudes towards “barbarians” developed in parallel with the growth of chattel slavery, especially in Athens. Slave ownership was no longer for the rich: most Athenian households came to have slaves.

The Hellenic stereotype of barbarism was that barbarians were like children, unable to speak or reason properly, effeminate, cowardly, luxurious, cruel, unable to control their appetites and desires, politically unable to govern themselves.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* says that the name Barbary, once used to describe North Africa, is derived from the region's Berber inhabitants, not from bárbaros.

The Chinese depicted non-Chinese groups as somewhat less than human, to justify conquering such peoples and taking their lands. The Great Wall of China was built to stop “barbarians” from crossing the northern border of China. The British, and other European colonial settlers of the United States, did the same thing by referring to Native Americans as “savages.”

Modern popular culture contains such fantasy figures as Conan the Barbarian. In such fantasy, the negative connotations are often inverted. For example, “The Phoenix on the Sword” (1932), is clearly slanted to imply that the kingdom greatly benefited by power passing from a decadent and tyrannical hereditary monarch to a strong and vigorous Barbarian usurper.

BARN BURNER

A “barn burner” is an event, often a sports contest, that is very exciting or intense. The earliest known use for this meaning is from the *Omaha World-Herald*, 13 May 1934.

But nearly 100 years prior to this, “barn burner” had a specific meaning in US politics. The Barnburners were radical men who were thought to be willing to destroy all banks and corporations, to root out their abuses.

The 1848 *Dictionary of Americanisms* provided a lengthy quote from the *New York Tribune*, which explained that the name alluded to the story of an old Dutchman who got rid of rats by burning the barns they infested.

The more conservative party was called the Hunkers, who opposed the Barnburners, and favored state banks, and minimizing the slavery issue. They may have been called Hunkers because they were interested in a hunk of the political spoils, or because they hankered after elective office.

Later, US wildcat oilmen used the word barnburner to describe a gusher oil well.

BATED BREATH

Breath that is held, or subdued, because of some emotion. “Bated” is simply a shortened form of “abated,” meaning “to bring down, lessen, depress, or stop.” So, “to wait with bated breath” essentially means to hold your breath.

But “bated” sounds exactly like “baited” and the two are often confused. Also, “bated” is mostly obsolete and only used in the above construction. We all know what “bait” means. A fisherman baits his line in hopes of a big catch.

Mark Twain used the word “bated” correctly in *Tom Sawyer*: “Every eye fixed itself upon him; with parted lips and bated breath the audience hung upon his words, taking no note of the time, rapt in the ghastly fascinations of the tale.”

Geoffrey Taylor, in his little poem *Cruel, Clever Cat*, 1933, used the confusion over the spelling of the word to good comic effect:

Sally, having swallowed cheese
Directs down holes the scented breeze
Enticing thus with baited breath
Nice mice to an untimely death.

BATTEN DOWN THE HATCHES

“Batten down the hatches,” means preparing for trouble.

“Hatch” means an opening in the deck of a ship. More formally called hatchways, these openings were commonplace on sailing ships and were normally either open or covered with a wooden grating to allow for ventilation of the lower decks. When bad weather was forecast, the hatches were covered with tarps, which were nailed down with wooden strips, known as battens, to prevent them from blowing off. This was called “battening down.”

The earliest reference to this practice appears to be in William Falconer’s *An Universal Dictionary of the Marine*, 1769. In a few decades, the expression was appearing regularly in accounts of storms at sea.

But the story begins on land with the noun “baton,” which meant a staff or stick used as a weapon, borrowed from the French around 1550. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a century later, an offshoot of “baton” showed up in writing as the carpentry term “batten.”

The securing of property, especially the covering with protective sheeting, is still called “battening down.”

A modern example of the phrase is from *Woman in Levi’s*, a 1967 memoir by Eulalia Bourne: “I hurried my horse to get home, batten down the hatches, and give welcome to the rain.”

BAZOOKA

There are two definitions for “bazooka.”

The *Merriam Webster Dictionary* says it’s “a tube-shaped, portable rocket launcher that fires a rocket capable of penetrating several inches of armor plate, as of a tank or other armored military vehicle.”

Wikipedia describes the bazooka as “a brass musical instrument several feet in length which incorporates telescopic tubing like the trombone. Radio comedian Bob Burns is credited with inventing the instrument in the 1910s and popularizing it in the 1930s.”

The name “bazooka” comes from an extension of the word “bazoo,” which is slang for “mouth” or “boastful talk,” and probably originated from the Dutch *bazuin* (trumpet). It appears in the 1909 novel *The Swoop, or how Clarence Saved England* by P. G. Wodehouse, describing a musical instrument used in music halls.

It was not until World War II that “bazooka” was adopted as the nickname of a new anti-tank weapon, due to its vague resemblance to the musical instrument.

So, the bazooka first produced music, then became a war weapon. Words travel some odd paths.

BEAT AROUND THE BUSH

“Beat around the bush” has four related meanings:

- To discuss a subject without getting to the main point
- To avoid discussing something difficult or embarrassing
- To speak in a roundabout, indirect or misleading way
- To attempt to hide the truth

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*, “beat the bushes for” is the original idiom and alluded to hunting. In bird hunts, some of the participants roused the birds by beating the bushes and enabling others to catch the quarry in nets or, in later years, to shoot them. Grouse hunting and other forms of hunt still use beaters today.

The phrase first appears in the medieval poem *Generydes -- A Romance in Seven-line Stanzas*, circa 1440:

“Butt as it hath be sayde full long agoo,
Some bete the bussh and some the byrdes take.”

Perhaps this is the source of “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.”

BEHIND THE 8-BALL

At a disadvantage, in a losing position, or in a tight spot. The phrase goes back to at least 1919.

The National Billiard Association, the governing body of American billiards from 1921 to 1941, offers this theory about the origin of the phrase: “It is generally conceded that the 8-ball is the most difficult for the player to see clearly in the execution of his shot. Because it is black, naturally the edges of the ball do not stand out as clearly as colored balls. Thus, professional players, if possible, avoid being forced to play the 8-ball from a difficult position or with the cue ball a long distance from the 8-ball because it is more difficult to see clearly.”

In the game of snooker, the roughly equivalent idiom is “snookered,” and it too has entered the language to mean much the same as “behind the 8-ball.”

BESIDE YOURSELF

You’re “out of your mind” with emotion, whether it's sorrow, joy, or rage.

The phrase “beside oneself” appeared at about the same time (1400s) as “out of one’s mind,” which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “having lost control of one’s mental faculties; insane, deranged, delirious.”

Synonyms are: distraught, frantic, desperate, frenzied, frustrated, confused, fearful, raging, mad, ecstatic. Similar phrases are: “in the pit of despair,” “in seventh heaven,” “cloud nine.”

Ancient Greeks believed that under great emotional stress the soul would actually leave the body. When this happened, a person was “beside himself,” split in two. The *Dictionary of Word Origins* says the Greek word for ecstasy meant “standing out of the body.”

An article on psychology says that the mental state of being beside oneself resembles the psychotic splitting of schizophrenia. The emotion one feels is so excessive that rational faculties are no longer functioning (thus “out of one’s mind”). It’s obvious, in such extreme states of feeling, that mental clarity would evaporate.

The article suggests that the being who “appears” when you’re beside yourself is your inner child. So, when you’re enraged, you may be regressing into a full-fledged temper tantrum, like a hyper-emotional two-year-old. Your emotional child self can’t help but think in absolutes.

The *OED* notes that the expression is now used in the slang sense of “stoned” (also bombed, pissed, etc.), as well as “stupefied, extremely intoxicated, or incapacitated by drink or drugs,” and “bored out of one’s mind.” Also, “out of it,” an expression that meant “not involved” when it showed up in the early 1800s, evolved into a 20th-century slang term meaning “confused, stupefied, or unconscious, especially after consuming drink or drugs.”

I don’t ever want to be beside myself. One of me is plenty.

BEST BIB AND TUCKER

This phrase describes your best clothes.

It arose in the 1600s, when people wore a bib (a frill at front of a shirt or dress) or a tucker (ornamental lace covering a woman’s neck and shoulders).

From the 1600s to late 1800s, bibs were somewhat like those of today, though not used to protect clothes from spilled food. Tuckers were lace pieces fitted over the bodice, sometimes called “pinnars” or “modesty pieces.”

Tuckers, as the name suggests, were originally tucked in. Pinnars were pinned rather than tucked. The first known incidence of “tucker” in print is from the Marquis d’Argens’ *New Memoirs establishing a True Knowledge of Mankind*, (1747): “The Country-woman minds nothing on Sundays so much as her best Bib and Tucker.” Tuckers were worn until the late 1800s.

Tucker also means food and, in that form, derives from “a tuck-out,” which meant “a hearty meal.” Both terms are listed in John Badcock’s *Slang: A Dictionary of the Turf*, 1823.

Tucker, like fuller, was once the occupation of a person who dressed woven cloth.

BIGGER FISH TO FRY

This means you have more important things to do.

The first written examples of this expression are over 400 years old, but the expression is much older than that. One clue is that there are similar expressions in other languages. For example, the French say, “He has many other dogs to whip.” The Germans say, “I have other hedgehogs to

comb.” A similar phrase, “There are other fish in the sea,” dates to about 1573.

The expression “bigger fish to fry” was published in 1660 in the work titled *Memoirs* written by John Evelyn. It also appears in the work of the Spanish novelist, Miguel de Cervantes, in the two volumes of *Don Quixote de La Mancha*, published in 1605 and 1615, and was translated as “other things on which to think.”

There are 1,600 to 3,500 idioms in regular use in English, with some 130 of them invented by William Shakespeare. He was a brilliant writer, but I’m not sure he could do better than, “I have other hedgehogs to comb.”

BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

This proverb is a colorful way of describing the fact that humans with similar tastes congregate in groups, just as birds of the same species frequently form flocks and fly together. Biologists say that this “safety in numbers” behavior makes the birds less at risk of predators.

In Benjamin Jowett’s translation of *Plato’s Republic*, the phrase appears thus: “Men of my age flock together; we are birds of a feather, as the old proverb says.”

Some birds, such as starlings, fly in groups of such density as to form beautiful moving shapes called murmurations.

Birds flock together in the game of golf, too. Here are the names of some scores:

Birdie: A score of one under par on a hole. The story goes that the name arose in 1899, when a golfer hit his second shot only inches from the cup on a par-four hole after his first shot had struck a bird in flight.

Eagle: A score of two under par, better than a birdie, so the bird had to be bigger.

Albatross or double eagle: A score of three under par (very rare). The albatross is one of the largest birds.

Condor: four under par, the lowest individual hole score ever made. Also ‘double albatross’ or ‘triple eagle.’

BLESS YOUR LITTLE COTTON SOCKS

This phrase is an expression of endearment, fondness, or appreciation for another person.

It’s mentioned in *The Dictionary of Catch Phrases*, by Eric Partridge, as follows: “Dating from c. 1905 ... a jocular benediction/thanks, as in, ‘Oh, bless their little cotton socks—they’ve left everything ready for us’; or simply in admiration of a baby, child, even a pet animal.”

Another source offers a possible and interesting historical origin. George Edward Lynch Cotton

(1813-1866) was a clergyman and educator. He taught at Rugby School and Marlborough College before becoming Bishop of Calcutta in 1858, performing missionary work and founding the famous “Cotton’s Schools.”

Cotton, as a religious man, was known to bless all the equipment used in his schools. Aware of the abject poverty in Calcutta, he regularly requested Britons for donations of warm socks for the children of the slums, and socks by the thousand were dutifully knitted and sent to Calcutta labelled “Cotton’s socks for blessing.”

The phrase “bless their little cotton socks” entered the language.

BLIMP

A blimp is a type of airship, or dirigible, that is powered, steerable, and lighter than air. With no internal structural framework or keel, the pressurized gas used to inflate such a vehicle and the strength of the envelope itself maintain its shape.

Zeppelins, on the other hand, have rigid frames that retain their shape without the use of gas. Several models of Zeppelins were built in the early 1900s. The most famous was the Hindenburg, destroyed by a fire in 1937 while landing in New Jersey.

And, though a hot air balloon may look like an airship, it is technically not, because it has no driver but relies on the wind to take it to the desired destination.

Blimps are the most commonly built airships because they are relatively easy to build and to transport when deflated. But, because of the unstable hull, their size is limited. A blimp with too long a hull may kink in the middle when the overpressure is insufficient or when maneuvered too fast. “Overpressure” for this purpose is defined as “more than normal atmospheric pressure,” meaning that the internal gas must be at a high enough pressure to keep the airship inflated.

The commonest theory for the origin of “blimp” is that it came to be used during World War I when the British were experimenting with lighter-than-air craft. The initial non-rigid aircraft was called the A-limp; and a second version, called the B-limp, was deemed more satisfactory.

Another theory is that in 1915, a naval officer flicked the envelope of an airship with his fingers, which produced a sound that he pronounced as “blimp”; and that the word caught on as the nickname for all small non-rigid airships. The “B-limp” explanation sounds a lot more likely.

Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company began building blimps in 1925. These were used for advertising and military purposes (i.e., surveillance and anti-submarine warfare) in World War II. Today, blimps are used mainly for advertising.

Then there’s that other use for “blimp,” to describe a person of generous proportions. But how inaccurate! After all, isn’t a blimp lighter than air?

BLING-BLING

Bling-bling, often shortened to bling, is ostentatious, over-the-top jewelry, designer bags, and so on, worn especially to indicate wealth or status.

It's unknown where the term was coined, but it became popular at the end of the 20th century, when 'bling' became a feature of the Gangsta rap hip hop scene in the US and Jamaica. It first appears in print in the lyrics of *Bling Bling*, recorded in 1999 by the rap artist B.G. (a.k.a. 'Baby Gangsta,' a.k.a. Christopher Dorsey), on the album *Chopper City In The Ghetto*:

Bling bling...
Big ballin' Calhounie's,
you can see him when he comin'
Booted up, diamond up
Golds be shinin' up,
all them diamonds be blindin' up.

Some people attribute the term to old cartoonish sound effects meant to convey the desirability or shininess of gold, gems, jewels, money, and more. Musicians involved with composing soundtracks often used a glockenspiel to signify the "bling" sound, that imaginary sound which light makes when it hits a diamond.

"Bling" was one addition to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* in 2002, and to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary* in 2006. These additions signify how common the term has become in American popular culture.

The film *Bling: Consequences and Repercussions*, concerns the fact that some diamonds were originally the blood diamonds that fuel wars, poverty, slavery, and killings across countries in Africa. Similarly, *Bling: A Planet Rock* contrasts the flashy world of commercial hip-hop jewelry against the devastation caused by the operation of diamond mines.

From a different perspective, many people consider bling and its aesthetic as empowering. I guess it depends on whether you regard bling as evidence of power or as a way of showing off.

Shiny things look pretty, as any crow will tell you, but whether they are worth acquiring is something else. Think of the insurance!

BLOOPER

A "bloop" is an error, usually accidental and humorous and, for the most part, made during a live radio or TV broadcast. However, they also occur in the sports world. Considering the pressure that performers endure, it's not surprising that such goofs happen.

"Bloop" was coined from the word bloop, a term used in 1920s US radio to refer to the annoying feedback noise that affected nearby radios when users tuned their sets incorrectly. Another term for bloopers is outtakes, though an outtake is not necessarily humorous.

Some common examples of bloopers include:

- Uncontrollable laughter (called, in television and acting circles, corpsing)
- Unanticipated incidents (a prop falling or breaking, a child/animal failing to behave)
- A prank or practical joke (to evoke laughter from cast and crew).

In recent years, mobile phones have been a new source of bloopers because performers forget to turn them off. The effect is pronounced when the film setting is ancient Greece or Rome).

With the coming of DVD in the 1990s, major film releases began to include a “blooper reel” as bonus material on the disc. In 1985, Steve Rotfeld began compiling stock footage of sports-related errors and produced a program known as *Bob Uecker’s Wacky World of Sports*. Among many other collections of bloopers was Art Linkletter’s *Kids Say the Darndest Things*.

One of the earliest known bloopers, long before movies and TV, is attributed to 1930s radio broadcaster Harry Von Zell, who accidentally introduced then-US President Herbert Hoover as “Hoobert Heever.”

On an episode of *The Red Skelton Show* in the 1950s, a skit involving Red’s character Clem Kadiddlehopper, had him leading a cow onto the stage. Several seconds into the live broadcast, the cow defecated on stage. Whereupon the audience laughed uncontrollably, and Skelton resorted to the use of the ad-libs.

A Canadian Broadcasting Corporation announcer’s station-identification message once came out as “This is the Dominion Network of the Canadian Broadcorping Castration.” This, in turn, coined an oft-used sarcastic term for the public broadcaster.

Bloopers may be embarrassing for those making them, but they certainly afford the rest of us some good laughs.

BOBBY PIN

“Bobby pins” are metal (or plastic) clips made with two flexible prongs, with one prong typically straight and one ridged. They are slid into the hair with the prongs open. Then the prongs close over the hair to hold it in place.

The bobby pin was invented by Luis Marcus, a San Francisco cosmetics manufacturer, after World War I, and came into wide use when the hairstyle known as the “bob cut” or “bobbed hair” became fashionable. He originally sold two handmade bobby pins for 35 cents. Marcus named the pin “bobby” after the bobbed hairstyle.

Bobby pins are also used in up-dos, buns, and other hair styles where a sleek look is desired. Though often plain and unobtrusive, some are decorated with beads, ribbons, or other details, and are usually worn to pull back front sections of hair. Bobby pins may also be tinted a hair color, such as blonde, brown, or red.

Bobby pins have many other uses:

- to hold head coverings such as bandannas in place

- as makeshift lock-picks
- as clothespins for drying lightweight articles
- as clips to hold multi-portion packages closed
- slipped over book pages as a bookmark
- as a roach clip when smoking a marijuana cigarette

Some are smooth and curved. These help with the grip factor and stay closer and more tightly attached to the hair that they are pinned to. They may also be padded to avoid creasing the hair.

BOOBY TRAP

A seemingly harmless object which may trigger a practical joke or a possibly lethal trap.

“Booby” has been in use since at least the 1600s, when it meant “stupid person or slow bird.” The “slow bird” referred to the large sea birds we call “boobies.” These birds have large wingspans but are clumsy and slow on land making them easy to catch. They are also known for landing aboard ships and becoming a meal for the crew.

Booby may originally be Spanish. The Spanish word “bobo” means stupid, one who is easily cheated, and so on. A “booby prize” literally means “idiot’s prize.”

As booby trap might be a practical joke, like an object placed on top of a door slightly ajar, ready to fall on the next person to pass through. However, by the early 1900s, it could also be an apparently harmless object containing a concealed explosive device designed to kill or injure. In *From Bapaume to Passchendaele*, 1918: “The enemy left ‘booby-traps’ to blow a man to bits or blind him for life if he touched a harmless-looking stick or opened the lid of a box.”

Booby traps are meant to be triggered by actions, so may present some form of bait to entice the victim. Lethal booby traps are used in warfare, particularly guerrilla warfare, and traps designed to cause injury or pain are also sometimes used by criminals wanting to protect drugs or other illicit property, and by some owners of legal property who wish to protect it from theft.

Activation of a booby trap is intended to be unexpected to its victim. Part of the skill in placing booby traps lies in exploiting natural human behaviors such as habit, where someone will open a door, drawer, or cupboard without thinking. Curiosity and greed also come into play; thus, attractive objects are frequently used as bait.

The use of booby traps in war demoralizes soldiers and keeps them continually stressed, suspicious and unable to relax. It can also slow down troop movement as soldiers are forced to sweep areas for booby traps. Like anti-personnel mines, they can harm civilians and other unsuspecting non-combatants.

Many computer viruses take the form of booby traps. They are triggered when an unsuspecting user performs an apparently ordinary action such as opening an email attachment.

BOOGIE-WOOGIE

“Boogie-woogie” is a style of blues music, closely linked to jazz forms like ragtime and stride, usually played on the piano for dancing. It developed in African American communities in the 1870s and became generally popular during the late 1920s. For the most part, boogie-woogie tunes are twelve-bar blues, though the style has been used for songs with other beats.

The term is first recorded in print as the title of Clarence “Pinetop” Smith’s 1928 record, *Pinetop’s Boogie Woogie*.

In 2010, the Marshall City Commission officially declared Marshall the birthplace of boogie-woogie music. It started a program to encourage additional historical research and to stimulate interest in and appreciation for the early African American culture in northeast Texas that played a vital role in creating boogie-woogie music.

Boogie-woogie may be related to the steam railroad, both in the way the music might have been influenced by the sounds of steam locomotives as well as the cultural impact of the sudden emergence of the railroad.

Alan Lomax wrote: “Black musicians, longing to grab a train and ride away from their troubles, incorporated the rhythms of the steam locomotive and the moan of their whistles into the new dance music they were playing in juke joints and dance halls. Boogie-woogie forever changed piano playing, as black piano players transformed the instrument into a polyrhythmic railroad train.”

Tommy Dorsey’s band recorded an updated version of *Pine Top’s Boogie Woogie* in 1938, which, as *Boogie Woogie*, became a hit in 1943 and 1945, and was to become the swing era’s second-best seller, after Glenn Miller’s *In the Mood*. From 1939, the Will Bradley orchestra had a string of boogie hits such as the original versions of “*Beat Me Daddy (Eight To The Bar)*” and *Scrub Me Mamma With A Boogie Beat*, in 1941.

The boogie-woogie fad lasted from the late 1930s into the 1950s and made a major contribution to the development of jump blues and ultimately to rock and roll, epitomized by Fats Domino, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis. The boogie beat continued in country music through the end of the 20th century.

BOOKWORM

“Bookworm” is a general name for any insect that bores through books. It’s also used to describe someone who loves to read books.

The damage to books that is commonly attributed to bookworms is, in fact, not caused by worms. Usually responsible are the larvae of various types of insects including beetles, moths, and cockroaches, which may chew through books seeking food. Some such larvae look like worms and likely inspired the term.

The figurative “bookworm” began in Elizabethan times as an insult, a negative term for someone who reads too much. Noah Webster, the lexicographer, saw the bookworm as being “attached to

books” and “addicted to study.” He also questioned the bookworm’s taste. He thought a bookworm was addicted to reading and didn’t always care what was read (the sort of person who might, for example, read the dictionary).

And what’s wrong with that? The dictionary is full of interesting words.

Today, the “bookworm” isn’t considered to be negative. There is nothing better than opening a new book, riffling through the pages ready to tell us a story, and smelling the bookish scent of paper. E-books don’t have a scent but, in either case, it’s the story that we find most important.

For a bookworm, going into a bookstore is both delightful and frustrating. There are shelves upon shelves of books, all with stories waiting to be discovered. But how do you pick just one or two out of all those thousands?

Books are loyal friends, always ready for the moment you want to escape the real world. You open a book, begin to read, and slip into another universe.

As for “reading too much,” is that actually possible?

BRIGHT-EYED AND BUSHY-TAILED

“Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed” means cheerful and lively, alert, and eager. The phrase is usually used to describe a person who bounces out of bed in the morning prepared to conquer the world. *The Oxford English Dictionary* says the phrase originated in America.

From the *Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins*: “Bright-eyed is obvious and the ‘bushy-tailed’ here is a reference to the tail of a cat, which fluffs up when the animal becomes excited. It dates to the 19th century.”

The two terms developed independently of each other. “Bright-eyed” supposedly comes from the late 1500s, while “bushy-tailed” is said to have originated around 1865-1870, though no direct source is clear for either.

They were seen together for the first time in talking about a squirrel. Anybody who has watched squirrels will agree that it’s an apt description. Squirrels are alert, most have big, fluffy tails, and they’re very fast on their feet. I’ve also seen the squirrel described as “a rodent with a great personality.” Some people are like that, too.

BRING HOME THE BACON

This means to earn money, particularly for one’s family, or to be financially successful.

Since the 1600s, “bacon” has been a slang term for a person’s body, and by extension, for a person’s livelihood or income. And real bacon, of course, comes from the body of a pig. The phrase itself was not coined until the early 1900s, in the US.

One popular theory holds that the phrase originated in the small town of Great Dunmow in England, in the 1100s. Legend says the local church would award a side of bacon to any man who could honestly say that he had not argued with his wife for a year and a day. Such a man, considered a role model, would “bring home the bacon.”

Another theory says the phrase got started in the 1500s at country fairs. One of the most popular contests was to catch a greased pig, a difficult task. The prize for catching the pig was that you got to keep it. Thus, you got to “bring home the bacon.”

One’s body (or bacon) is the key to winning in the sport of boxing. In 1906, Joe Gans, the first native-born black American to win a world title, and “Battling” Oliver Nelson fought for the world lightweight championship in Goldfield, Nevada. This match has been rated as the greatest lightweight championship bout ever contested.

A New York newspaper, *The Post-Standard*, reported that before the fight, Gans received a telegram from his mother: “Joe, the eyes of the world are on you. Everybody says you ought to win. Peter Jackson will tell me the news and you bring home the bacon.” Gans won and *The New York Times* reported that he had replied by telegraph that he “had not only the bacon, but the gravy,” and that he later sent his mother a check for \$6,000.

Where did Mrs. Gans hear the saying? We don’t know. But it quickly rose in popularity after the 1906 bout. By 1911 it was being used in politics and P. G. Wodehouse used it in a book in 1924.

BROWN AS A BERRY

Very brown and often refers to a good suntan. Nobody knows the origin of the phrase, but it’s old. Chaucer used it twice in his *Canterbury Tales* and it was probably common in speech years before it was used in writing.

One theory suggests it refers to coffee beans (berries), but that isn’t true because coffee wasn’t brought to England until long after Chaucer. A second theory is that “berry” might refer to a nut, but there’s no proof for that.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* does say that, in the 900s, “berry” was most used for grapes. At the time, the climate in southern Britain was very warm and grapes were commonly grown. But I have yet to meet a grape that could be called brown.

However, ancient writers seemed to emphasize light and dark rather than refer to specific colors. The *OED* gives the earliest sense of “brown” as dusky or dark. Other languages appear to have a similar approach. In Swedish, *brun* could mean dark-colored or black, dark red, or reddish-brown. In Old French *brun* meant a dark shade between red and black. Old High German *brûn* meant dark-colored.

It’s still hard to apply “brown” to a berry. Raspberries and strawberries are pink to red, blueberries are blue, blackberries are red when green and black when ripe. And gooseberries are pale green.

But “brown as a berry” still stands today to describe a suntan. It’s probably the alliteration that is appealing.

BUMPKIN

A “bumpkin” is an unsophisticated or socially awkward person from the countryside, a yokel, a hayseed, a hick. There are many words to indicate the dim-wittedness of rustics but few to suggest their intelligence. Obviously, these words are meant to be insulting.

In the 1500s, a “bumpkin” was a name the English used for the Dutch, whom they portrayed as small, comic, and tubby. The word arises from either the Dutch *boomken*, meaning “little tree” or *bommekijn*, meaning “little barrel.” Back then, the British and the Dutch were less than friendly, as they sparred over trade routes and political boundaries and traded insults.

By the 1700s, “bumpkin” just meant “stupid fellow.”

Holland had “yokels.” “Yokel” was derived as a name for an ignorant rustic from the old dialect name for a green woodpecker. An early example in print is found in 1820.

Meanwhile, in America, the word ‘hick’ became popular. Hick originated in the UK via the habit of changing the first letters of names to make diminutive nicknames. Robert became Bob, William became Bill and Richard became Dick or Hick. The British publication *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew*, 1699, defines “Hick” as: “A silly Country Fellow.”

“Hayseed” is another term for a rustic. It was coined by Herman Melville, in *Moby-Dick*, 1851, where he suggests that a “country-bred ... downright bumpkin” would fare badly in a storm at sea: “Ah, poor Hay-Seed! how bitterly will burst those straps in the first howling gale.”

Another US term is “hillbilly.” The *New York Journal* in April 1900 defined it thus: “A Hill-Billie is a free and untrammelled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him.”

As a genuine, card-carrying stubble-jumper myself, I’m inclined to think that city slickers are just jealous of our freedom. Though I doubt the RCMP would take kindly to me firing off a revolver whenever I felt like it.

BUM’S RUSH

When you get the “bum’s rush,” you’re hustled out the way a bum would be hurried out of a bar or restaurant to prevent him begging from the customers. A bum is a down-and-outer trying to cadge money or drinks. Today, we would probably call him a “street person.”

The way a bum's rush is done is to grab the bum by the back of the shirt collar and the back of

the belt and propel him or her out into the snow. Or rain, if it's the Wet Coast.

"Bum" was first recorded in 1855 and, during the Civil War, was used to describe a foraging soldier. It may have derived from two words: the German *bummer*, "a high-spirited, irresponsible person," and the old English word "bum," which for four hundred years has been slang for both "a drunk" and "buttocks."

In the 1890-1900s, many saloons had a "free lunch" for customers — sandwiches, pickles, boiled eggs, and so on, to encourage them to stay and buy drinks. Sometimes a penniless man might slip into the saloon to grab a bite of the "free lunch" without buying drinks. If the bartender spotted him, he'd get the bum's rush.

In the early 1900s, bailiffs who ejected people from their property, usually to repossess it or enforce eviction, were known as "bums," and a "bum's rush" described the bailiff's fast and forceful tactic to eject these unfortunates. The upward pull of both the collar and belt caused the malefactor to be light-footed and unable to drag themselves to stop being ejected.

In *It's A Wonderful Life*, Nick, the bartender, says to two other characters, "That's it. Out you two pixies go — through the door or out the window." He gives them the bum's rush.

In movies, the person being thrown out always very conveniently wears a collared shirt, and trousers with a belt. It might not work so well today, with a tee and leotards.

BUNCO

"Bunco" is a game or swindling scheme. A "bunco squad" (or "fraud squad") is a police department dealing with fraud. A "bunco crime" is a swindle in which a person is cheated at gambling, persuaded to buy a nonexistent or worthless object, or otherwise victimized. And a "bunco artist"? A confidence trickster or con artist.

Bunco was originally a confidence game, originating in 1800s England. It was imported to San Francisco as a gambling activity in 1855, where it gave its name to gambling parlors, or "Bunco parlors," and more generally to any swindle. After the Civil War, the gambling game evolved to a popular parlor game. During the 1920s and Prohibition, Bunco was re-popularized as a gambling game, often associated with a speakeasy.

Bunco as a family game became popular once more in the 1980s. According to the *World Bunco Association*, in 2005, "over 59 million women have played Bunco and over 27 million play regularly." The first World Championship was held in 2006.

As played today, Bunco is a social dice game involving 100% luck and no skill (there are no decisions to make), and a simple set of rules. Bunco fundraisers have become popular over the years, earning large sums for charities. According to *The Washington Post*, Bunco is sometimes called the housewife's drinking game. Online games go on all over the world.

BURN THE MIDNIGHT OIL

To “burn the midnight oil” means working late into the night. Originally this was by the light of an oil lamp or a candle. Now that we can just flip a switch, the phrase is figurative. It first appears in print in the early 1600s.

The phrase is connected to an old word, “elucubrate,” meaning to work late by candlelight. Henry Cockeram defined that in his *The English dictionarie, or an interpreter of hard English words*, 1623: “Elucubrate, to doe a thing by candlelight.” My *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (2003) says the prime meaning now is, “to produce, (especially literary work) by long and intensive effort.”

The phrase is still in everyday use. Porter Wagoner and Dolly Parton released an album called *The Right Combination/Burning the Midnight Oil*, in 1972. And *Midnight Oil* is the name of an Australian rock band.

BUSMAN’S HOLIDAY

If you take a “busman’s holiday,” you spend your free time doing the same thing you do at work. For example, a carpenter who spends a weekend repairing a friend’s house is taking a busman’s holiday.

“Busman” refers to the driver of early buses, which were powered by horses. The phrase is originally British, dating from the end of the 1800s. It spread around the world and reached North America in 1909.

As for how the phrase originated, one theory says that if a busman wanted to go on vacation, he most likely would need to take a bus to get there. This seems reasonable since a popular day out among working-class Londoners in the late 1800s was to make an excursion by bus. Somewhat more far-fetched is the theory that a cabby would spend his day off each week in riding with a fellow cabby to keep him company.

Another theory appeared in John Ciardi’s *A Browser’s Dictionary* in 1981: “British drivers of horse-drawn omnibuses, becoming attached to their teams, were uneasy about turning them over to relief drivers who might abuse them. On their days off, therefore, the drivers regularly went to the stables to see that the horses were properly harnessed and returned at night to see that they had not been abused.”

The popular phrase may, however, have been based on a Londoner’s joke, something like, “What does a busman do on his day off? He takes a bus ride with a pal, of course.” In time, the joke would have been forgotten, but the phrase, because it is so apt for many people, survived. If you enjoy your work, why not do it all the time?

BUTTER SOMEONE UP

“To butter someone up” means to flatter someone in hopes of getting something from them. “Flatter” is a synonym, meaning to seek a favor by excessive praise.

There are two possible origins of this idiom. Some people believe that it comes from the action of spreading smooth, creamy butter on a slice of bread, which can be compared to spreading nice words on a person. Others believe that it originated in ancient India, where people threw balls of ghee (clarified butter used in Indian cooking) at statues of gods to ask for a favor. By “buttering up” the gods, it was hoped that the worshippers would be rewarded with peace and good harvests.

Tibetan New Year celebrations include sculptures made of colored butter displayed as gifts to the heavens. This ritual goes back to the Tang Dynasty (CE 618-907).

BUTTER WOULDN'T MELT IN HIS MOUTH

This phrase means he is prim and proper, or demure and insincere, with a cool demeanor, the latter being the most important part. This old saying was included as a proverb in John Heywood's collection of 1546.

The saying is puzzling, since in these modern days of refrigerators, you could put even frozen butter in your mouth, and it would quickly melt. The saying can only be applied to people who are so cool and emotionless that they don't even have enough warmth to melt butter.

The phrase was usually used in a derogatory sense but sometimes denoted a meek sweetness of temper rather than emotional coldness. An example is this description of Mr. Pecksniff in Charles Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit*: “It would be no description of Mr. Pecksniff's gentleness of manner to adopt the common parlance and say that he looked at this moment as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. He rather looked as if any quantity of butter might have been made out of him, by churning the milk of human kindness as it spouted upwards from his heart.”

Here are a few other food-related phrases.

Cry over spilt milk — to be upset over a past event

To die for — how I feel about pie, especially lemon

Pig's breakfast or dog's dinner — distasteful, a mess

Have a finger in every pie — to be involved in a lot of different activities. Shakespeare used it in Henry VIII:

“The devil speed him!

No man's pie is freed

From this ambitious finger!”

BY AND LARGE

This phrase has come to mean “on the whole; generally speaking; all things considered.”

It's nautical in origin, used as far back as the 1500s, and meant sailing “alternately close-hauled and not close-hauled.” The earliest known reference to “by and large” in print is in *The Mariners Magazine*, 1669.

When the wind is blowing from behind a ship's direction of travel, it is said to be "large." As you can imagine, that is the most favorable wind and, with big square sails, a ship could travel fast in the downwind direction.

In simplified terms, "by" means "in the general direction of." Sailors would say that to be "by the wind" is to face into the wind or within six compass points of it.

Sailing "by and large" required the ability to sail not only downwind, but against the wind. It may seem impossible but sailing ships can progress against the wind. Doing so involves the use of triangular sails, which act like airplane wings and provide a force that drags the ship sideways against the wind. With this dragging, and by correct angling of the rudder, the ship can sail "into" the wind.

The 1800s windjammers like *Cutty Sark* were able to maintain progress "by and large" even in bad wind conditions, using many such aerodynamic triangular sails and large crews of able seamen.

A ship could either sail "large," or it could sail "by the wind," but never both at the same time. Therefore, in sailors' parlance, the phrase "by and large" meant "in all possible circumstances."

I've sailed on ships. By and large, I'd rather walk.

BY HOOK OR BY CROOK

This means "by any method necessary," suggesting that you should do whatever you have to, whether or not ethical and legal, to accomplish a goal.

The origin of the phrase has several explanations and has endured at least partly because hook and crook rhyme. We humans seem to love rhymes as much as alliteration.

The first substantiated example is from John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, 1390. Another example is in Philip Stubbes' *The Anatomie of Abuses*, 1583: "Either by hooke or crooke, by night or day."

Of the four most common theories, the first is that "by hook or by crook" derives from the ancient English custom of allowing peasants to gather from royal forests any deadwood they could pull down with a shepherd's crook or cut with a reaper's billhook. William Cobbett recorded this feudal custom in the 1820s, although the custom itself is much older than that.

The second theory suggests that the phrase comes from the name of an ancient lighthouse, Hook Head on the east side of Waterford harbor, and Crooke, the village on the other side of Waterford channel, in Ireland. Cromwell is supposed to have said that Waterford would fall "by Hook or by Crooke," because he intended to land his army at one of those two places during the siege of the town.

The third theory says the phrase derives from an English judge, Sir George Croke. Croke (or Crook) was on the bench during the reign of Charles I (1600-1649) and became known for his refusal to accept the legality of a 'Ship Money' tax imposed by Charles without the consent of Parliament. It was a common saying that ship money "may be gotten by Hook (by force), but not by Crook."

The fourth theory suggests the phrase derives from an article dated 15 Feb. 1851 in the scholarly research publication *Notes and Queries*. The article linked it with the problem of establishing exact locations of plots of land after the great fire of London in 1666. "The surveyors appointed to determine the rights of the various claimants were Mr. Hook and Mr. Crook, who by the justice of their decisions gave general satisfaction to the interested parties, and by their speedy determination of the different claims, permitted the rebuilding of the city to proceed without the least delay. Hence arose the saying above quoted, usually applied to the extrication of persons or things from a difficulty."

The last three suggestions are based on events that happened much later than the phrase's first appearance in print. Therefore, the first, "wood gathering with hooks and crooks," has to be a strong favorite.

Hooks and crooks have now been replaced by credit cards.

QUICK BITES

BALLPARK FIGURE — A rough estimate, an acceptable range of approximation. For example, when offering figures, "I hope that's in the ballpark (within a particular range)." The connection to baseball is odd, given that the most figures having to do with the game (such as batting averages and earned run averages) are relentlessly precise.

BAMBOOZLE — To deceive or get the better of by trickery (1695). It could also mean to perplex, mystify, or confound. One theory connects "bamboozle" to the Scots word *bombaze*, which means "to confuse or mystify." Another theory connects it to the French word *embabouiner* meaning "to make a fool of" (literally, "to make a baboon of").

BARMY — Mad, crazy, extremely foolish, excited, flighty, empty-headed (full of nothing but froth). It comes from the noun "barm" which is the froth that forms on the top of fermenting malt liquors. This froth is used to leaven bread and cause fermentation in other liquors. (1585)

BERSERK — Furiously violent, out of control. A historic Scandinavian warrior frenzied in battle and held to be invulnerable.

BLOVIATE — Empty, pompous, political speech. The term originated in Ohio about 1850, used by US President Warren G. Harding, who described it as "the art of speaking for as long as the occasion warrants, and saying nothing." His opponent, William Gibbs McAdoo, described it as "the impression of an army of pompous phrases moving over the landscape in search of an idea." The word may come from blow or blowhard, with a mock-Latin ending to give it the self-important stature implicit in its meaning.

BLUE-EYED BOY — The current darling, or favorite. More used in Britain and Australia than in America, and often with a derogatory or envious tone of voice. It seems to have been coined by P.G. Wodehouse in *Damsel in Distress* (1919): “He’s the blue-eyed boy, and everyone else is an also-ran.” Perhaps Wodehouse saw *The Blue-eyed Boy*, a 1916 painting by Modigliani. The boy in the painting has a self-important expression that makes me want to smack him. Hard.

BOBBY DAZZLER — A striking or exciting person, especially in dress (northern England).

BOBBY SOCKS — A style of women’s sock, so called because they are “shortened” or “bobbed” compared to knee-socks. (1943)

BODACIOUS — Impressive, awesome, brave, prodigious (1832). It was once spelled as “bowdacious.” Lexicographers think that it is from an English West Country dialect, written as boldacious or bowldacious, which was probably an amalgam of bold and audacious. One of the earliest US examples is from Georgia, in 1845: “She’s so bowdacious unreasonable when she’s riled.”

BOGUS — Counterfeit money and anything else fake. It also means wrong, uncool, unfair, unreal, off, messed up. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* says: “Bogus has been a part of English since the early 1800s. Back then, a bogus was a machine used to make counterfeit coins. No one knows for sure how this coin-copying contraption got its name, but before long bogus had also become a popular noun for funny money itself or for a fraudulent imitation of any kind. The more general ‘phony’ began being used about the same time.”

BRAINIAC — A comic book supervillain (1938); a very intelligent person (1982).

BROUHAHA — Fuss, argument, or ruckus, usually one that produces more noise than bruises. The word came, around 1890, from the French *brouhaha*, said to have been, in medieval theater, “the cry of the devil disguised as clergy.”

BRUME — Mist or fog, 1694, from Latin *bruma* ‘winter.’

BUMFUZZLE — Confuse or fluster, originating in the southern US (1900).



CAESAR SALAD

A Caesar salad is made of romaine lettuce and croutons dressed with lemon or lime juice, olive oil, Worcestershire sauce, egg, anchovies, garlic, Dijon mustard, Parmesan cheese, and black pepper. In its original form, this salad was prepared and served tableside. Though the salad has Mediterranean ingredients, it has nothing to do with any Roman emperors.

The salad's creation is usually attributed to restaurateur Caesar Cardini, an immigrant from Italy, who operated restaurants in Mexico and the US. His daughter Rosa said that her father invented the salad at his restaurant *Caesar's* (at the Hotel Caesar) when a Fourth of July rush in 1924 depleted the kitchen's supplies. Cardini made do with what he had, adding the drama of table-side tossing by the chef. The original recipe included whole lettuce leaves, which were meant to be lifted by the stem and eaten with the fingers.

In 1938 Cardini moved to Los Angeles and opened a gourmet food store. His patrons followed, arriving with empty wine bottles for him to fill with the dressing. In 1948, the demand for the dressing made him and Rosa decide to bottle it and to establish Caesar Cardini Foods. Bottled Caesar dressings are now made and marketed by many companies.

Variations of this salad exist; yogurt is sometimes used instead of eggs to maintain a creamy texture, and others call for using mayonnaise. Although the original recipe does not contain anchovies, modern recipes typically include anchovies as a key ingredient.

Some of Caesar's friends and family dispute his claim. Livio Santini, for example, claimed he made the salad from a recipe of his mother's, in the kitchen of Caesar's restaurant in 1925, when he was 18 years old, and that Caesar took the recipe from him.

Julia Child wrote that she had watched the salad being made in the 1920s. "Caesar himself rolled the cart up to the table, tossed the romaine in a great wooden bowl, and I wish I remembered his every move, but I don't."

In the book *In Search of Caesar, The Ultimate Caesar Salad Book* (1995) by Terry D. Greenfield, he states: "The legend attributes the salad's debut to Mrs. Wallis Warfield Simpson (mistress and ultimately wife of Prince Edward VIII of Wales, former King of England). Mrs. Simpson often visited and partied in the San Diego area in the 1920s. During this time, Mrs. Simpson visited Hotel Caesar's Place and became fond of Caesar's salad."

But, in a 1952 interview, Caesar Cardini said that the salad did not become well-known until 1937 when a Hollywood screenwriter provided the recipe to various restaurants. Three years before Cardini's death in 1956, the master chefs of the *International Society of Epicures* in Paris proclaimed Caesar's salad as "the greatest recipe to originate from the Americas in 50 years."

CALF

A leg muscle, a baby cow, or a big chunk of ice.

According to an online dictionary, a “calf” is also:

- Leather made of calf skin, especially a fine, pale leather used in bookbinding
- A young elephant, seal, or whale (and some other large land animals)
- A small island, near a larger island (the Calf of Man)
- A cableless railroad engine
- An awkward or silly person (informal, dated)

The human calf muscle is important, and you can do all sorts of nasty things to it: strain, pull, cramp, tear, or rupture.

“Calf” and “calf of the leg” are documented in Middle English, circa 1350 and 1425.

Words ending with an ‘f’ are easy enough to use in the singular, but plurals can be tricky. For gulf or chief or roof, you only need to add an s to create the plural—gulfs, chiefs, and roofs. With others, such as leaf and shelf, replace the ‘f’ with ‘ves’—leaves and shelves.

But *Merriam-Webster* lists “calfs” as an option for the plural of calf, especially when using the word as plural for calfskin. Here’s an example from *The Denver Post*: “...Hawaii’s whale-watching season, which winds down in May, when humpback whales are still nursing their new calfs and preparing for their long journey back to Alaskan waters.”

Maybe, someday, “calfs” will become the dominant plural form of calf, but for now it comes second to calves.

CANOODLE

“Canoodle” means to kiss and cuddle amorously, to pet or fondle.

The origin is unknown, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* says the word was used in Britain in the 1830s in a sense of “cheat” or “overpower.” Today, “canoodling” means playful public displays of affection by couples in love.

The canoe has always been useful, but during the prudish Victorian era, it became popular both as a recreational vehicle and as a mode of courtship. At that time, marriage ceased to be about necessity or convenience and became more about two people falling in love.

Courtship was the popular path to marriage, as long as the courting couple was accompanied by a guardian devoted to maintaining “proper” behavior. Privacy and sex were reserved for marriage.

The canoe was the best option for escaping a chaperon because there was no room for a third person. Also, a canoe could offer more privacy by letting the couple slip into a hidden cove or behind a low-hanging willow. Canoe courtship earned naive approval, the assumption being that

a young couple could hardly get into compromising positions in something so tippy and awkward as a canoe.

Canoe manufacturers were quick to catch on and produced sleek vehicles known as “courting canoes,” the Victorian ancestors of the 1960s “shag wagon.” Some canoes had parasol stands and others came with fold-up gramophones.

The decade following World War I was the time of the “New Woman.” One popular theme in postcards was to show a woman alone and insisting, “I can paddle my own canoe.” Another shows a sad-looking woman saying: “I can paddle my own canoe, but it’s awful lonesome.”

CAN’T MAKE HEADS OR TAILS OF

This phrase means you’re confused and can’t figure out what to do. It may have been born in Ancient Rome, in a phrase used by Cicero, (106 to 43 BCE), *ne caput nec pedes*, which means “neither head nor feet.” In other words, you can’t tell which end is which.

Sometimes we choose by flipping a coin, because either outcome, heads or tails, has a likelihood of exactly 50 percent. “Heads” refers to the side of the coin with a human head on it. “Tails” refers to the opposite side, merely because it is the opposite. Sometimes there isn’t a human head etched on the coin, so you can’t tell which is heads and which is tails. In that case, you can’t make head nor tails of it, right?

All this could mean you’re “out to lunch.” If you’re “out to lunch” you’re inattentive, absent-minded, not in touch with reality, stupid, crazy, or not all there. Your mind took a lunch break and never came back. The expression originated on American college campuses in the 1950s and first appeared in print in 1955.

CANUCK

“Canuck” is a slang term for a Canadian. The origin of the word is uncertain.

The term “Kanuck” is first recorded in 1835 as an Americanism, referring to Dutch or French Canadians. By the 1850s, the word had become “Canuck.” Today, many people use “Canuck” as a term for any Canadian.

As for “Canada,” The *Montreal Gazette* wrote: “When we celebrate Canada Day, we’re actually celebrating Village Day. The French explorer Jacques Cartier heard the name spoken by two indigenous boys on his 1535 expedition up the St. Lawrence River — they told him the way to ‘kanata’.” The boys didn’t mean the entire region but merely the next village.

According to the *Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles*, the true origin of “Canuck” lies in Hawaii. In the early 1800s, sailors from Hawaii worked on many whaling ships, and the Hawaiian word for a person — *kanaka* — jumped into American English.

“Johnny Canuck” developed around 1860 and often appeared as a burly lumberjack, but was also

portrayed as a farmer, a rancher, and a soldier. As a personification of Canada, he appeared in political cartoons of the 1860s, resisting Uncle Sam's bullying. Johnny Canuck was revived in 1942 to defend Canada against the Nazis.

In 1900, Henry Herbert Godfrey wrote both *Johnny Canuck's the Lad* and *When Johnny Canuck Comes Home*.

"Canuck" is a nickname for three Canadian-built aircraft from the 1900s: the Curtiss JN-4C training biplane; the Avro CF-100 jet fighter; and the Fleet 80 Canuck. The name was also used for a brand of firearms engineered and distributed by O'Dell Engineering Ltd since 2014: Canuck 1911, Canuck Over Under, Canuck Shotgun.

In 1975, in comics by Richard Comely, Captain Canuck is a super-agent for Canadians' security, and had enhanced strength and endurance thanks to being bathed in alien rays during a camping trip. The captain was reintroduced in the mid-1990s, and again in 2004.

The Canada national rugby union team (men's) is officially nicknamed "Canucks," and we also have the Crazy Canucks, the Canadian alpine ski racers who competed successfully on the World Cup circuit in the '70s. And don't forget the Vancouver Canucks, a professional ice hockey team.

CARRY COALS TO NEWCASTLE

This means to do something wholly pointless.

Newcastle Upon Tyne in England was the UK's first coal exporting port and has been well-known as a coal mining center since the Middle Ages. Therefore, sending coal to Newcastle was a complete waste of time. It had plenty of its own.

The association of the city with coal and with the phrase itself is old. In 1606, Thomas Heywood wrote: "As common as coales from Newcastle."

Timothy Dexter, an American entrepreneur, succeeded in defying the idiom in the 1700s by actually shipping coal to Newcastle. Renowned for his eccentricity and widely regarded as a buffoon, he was persuaded to sail a shipment of coal to Newcastle by rival merchants plotting to ruin him. However, he made a large profit because his cargo arrived during a miners' strike which had crippled local production.

Although the coal industry of Newcastle upon Tyne is now practically non-existent, the expression can still be used for the harbor of Newcastle in Australia. Abundant coal deposits were discovered there, and the Australian Newcastle has succeeded its UK namesake by becoming the largest exporter of coal in the modern world.

The idiom is now frequently used by the media when reporting business ventures whose success may initially appear just as unlikely. It has been referred to in coverage of the export to India of chicken tikka masala from the UK, the sale of Scottish pizzas to Italy, and the flowing of champagne and cheese from Britain to France.

Other countries have similar phrases. In German it's "taking owls to Athens," because Athenians are already thought to have sufficient wisdom. "Selling snow to Eskimos" or "selling sand to Arabs," also seem pointless.

CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE?

A question for someone who is inexplicably silent. The phrase was in common use until the mid-1900s, often asked of children who were being suspiciously quiet.

But the question was also sometimes directed at adults when they were expected to respond. After a meal, my mother would offer my father a second cup of tea. Often, he was so involved with his own thoughts that it would take ten minutes for the question to penetrate and for him to say, "please" and offer his cup. She never asked if the cat had his tongue, however. No doubt she'd learned that he wouldn't hear that either.

The phrase is first found in print in 1881, in the US paper *Ballou's Monthly Magazine*. To "hold one's tongue," meaning to shut up, dates to Old English (c.897 CE).

The most interesting theory about the source comes from the Middle Ages when people believed in magic. The story goes that if you encountered a witch, her black cat (often a symbol of witchcraft and evil) would steal your tongue, thus rendering you speechless and unable to tell anyone what you saw. Another theory is that the "cat" refers to the cat-o'-nine-tails, a vicious whip used to punish early sailors "and which would render the victim speechless."

A third theory is the suggestion that ancient kings cut off the tongues of liars and fed the tongues to their cats.

Yet a fourth theory comes from an ancient belief that a cat can suck the breath from a sleeping child. That theory is false, but since cats are liable to grab anything moving, perhaps there does exist, somewhere, the tale of one pouncing on a protruding tongue. Hopefully with claws not extended.

CATCH LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE

This means to capture something powerful and elusive and be able to hold it and show it to the world. It can also be defined as accomplishing a nearly impossible task, or a moment of creative brilliance.

This American idiom originated in the 1800s, very likely referring to Benjamin Franklin's electricity experiment, in which Franklin flew a kite in a thunderstorm, hoping that lightning would strike it so that he might collect some electricity in a Leyden jar. This source hasn't been confirmed, but it certainly seems apt.

Another theory is that Leo Durocher (a manager for the Brooklyn Dodgers) coined it. A report in the *Nevada State Journal* for October 8, 1941, said: "The Yanks were the dominant team

throughout, outhitting, outfielding, outpitching and outmaneuvering the Dodgers. Brooklyn was not outgamed but the Dodgers, to use Lippy Leo Durocher's favorite expression, went out to try to catch lightning in a bottle."

CHEAPSKATE

"Cheapskates" are mean or despicable people, also known as misers, pikers, scrooges, skinflints, tight-wads, or penny-pinchers. In other words, they have short arms and long pockets. Apparently, "cheapskate" was also a slang term for a troublesome rating in the Royal Navy.

"Cheapskate" originated in the USA in the late 1800s. Although a "skate" may mean footwear, a flatfish, or a worn-out horse, the *Oxford English Dictionary* also lists it as slang for "a mean or contemptible person."

The *Ohio Newark Daily Advocate* in 1896 had a story about a streetcar motorman who was remonstrating with a coal wagon driver: "You're a gol dinged, insignificant, pusillanimous, ragged, cheap skate of a tenth assistant barnyard corporal." The motorman obviously had a creative mind and a ready tongue!

"Skate" may be a variant of the Scottish word "skite" or "skeet," for a person who is regarded with contempt. The US word "blatherskite" refers to a person who talks interminable nonsense. "Cheapskate" and "blatherskite" seem to have been formed in the same way, so it's likely that the Scots word was the source of "cheapskate."

CHERRY PICKING

"Cherry picking," also known as "stacking the deck," describes a situation where only favorable evidence is presented in order to persuade the audience to accept a position. Evidence against the position is withheld. It's a sign of poor science or pseudo-science.

The term comes from the process of harvesting fruit. The picker selects only the ripest and healthiest, ignoring those which are diseased, misshapen, or not ripe enough to eat.

Cherry picking can mislead, presenting a rosy picture that is false, although the facts presented may be true in themselves. But the arguments on the other side may be stronger and we won't know until we examine them.

Cherry picking is universal. Whenever a broad spectrum of information exists, appearances can be rigged by highlighting some facts while ignoring others. Card stacking is a similar term and used by groups with specific agendas.

For example, an enlistment poster might feature an impressive picture, with words such as "travel" and "adventure." The words, "enlist for two to four years" will be at the bottom in a smaller and less noticeable point size. The statement, "You are risking your life," never appears.

CHEW THE SCENERY

Overact, be melodramatic, ham it up. The phrase was originally used for the theater.

Brewer's Twentieth Century Phrase and Fable says the phrase was invented by the New York columnist and wit Dorothy Parker in one of her scathing reviews around 1930. But it's older than that, for it appeared in the *Rocky Mountain News* of March 1891. It has been used so much that it's now a cliché.

Sometimes 'chewing the scenery' is appropriate. Gilbert and Sullivan comic operettas come to mind and let's not forget the melodrama in far too many political speeches. Then there are the drama queens in our own lives, the relatives or friends who can make the smallest event into a major happening.

Actors and politicians often ham it up in a portrayal of frenzy so great that it appears they might really bite a chunk out of the set or the microphone. Some might think, from the speechifying, that the speaker is spirited and intense, but you must pay attention to what is actually said, which may amount to nothing.

I have no talent for chewing scenery. When working in live theater, I was invited to join a screaming crowd scene but failed miserably to seem real. I went back to my bookkeeping desk and screamed at the debits and credits.

CHICKENS COME HOME TO ROOST

The "chickens" are bad deeds or words returning to discomfit their perpetrator or, rather more succinctly, something you've done comes back to bite you in the ass.

The idea was in print as early as 1390, when Geoffrey Chaucer used it in *The Parson's Tale*. Originally, the allusion was to a wild bird returning to its nest at nightfall. Chickens didn't enter the scene until the 1800s, when this phrase was used on the title page of Robert Southey's poem *The Curse of Kehama*, 1810: "Curses are like young chicken: they always come home to roost."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge used the imagery of a bird returning to punish a bad deed in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, 1798. In the poem the mariner kills an albatross, which was regarded by sailors as an omen of good luck and is punished by his shipmates by having the bird hung around his neck.

By the 1800s, the expression had been abbreviated. James Russell Lowell wrote in 1870, "All our mistakes sooner or later surely come home to roost."

Buddhists are familiar with the theory of bad deeds returning to haunt the perpetrator. They call it karma.

The chocolate ice cream I love so much always comes home to roost on my hips.

CHITCHAT

“Chat” is casual small talk or gossip. “Chitchat” is the same, for it’s simply a reduplication of chat. It’s something humans obviously love to do because it has so many synonyms. Here are a few: cackle, chin music, chin wag, gab, gossip, jaw, palaver, patter, rap, schmooze, small talk, chatter, natter, and yatter. “Chatter” has been used as both a noun and a verb since the 1200s.

Chitchat was also the name of a computer program which is no longer used. Maybe it took too many bytes for chatting.

Reduplication means to repeat a sound. For example: “choo choo” or “bye-bye.” “Ablaut reduplication” is when the word is the same except the vowel changes. Here are some examples:

- pitter patter
- knickknack
- ding dong
- badda-bing, badda-bang, badda-boom

If you reverse the order of these words, they sound strange. We don’t have knackknicks on our shelves. Our bells don’t go dong ding.

Terms like this have a ruleset. The word with “i” comes first, followed by the one with “a” and then the one with “o.” This happens 100% of the time and is unchangeable. Therefore, it applies to proper nouns, too, so we have tic tacs and King Kong.

We haven’t yet learned why we do this. Forsyth, writing for the BBC, said, “English is largely made up of the rules we don’t know that we know.” That certainly hasn’t stopped us from chitchatting with one another.

CHOCK-A-BLOCK

Crammed so tightly together that nothing can move. Similar words are “chock-full” and “jam-packed.”

The derivation of “chock” isn’t clear but may have come from “choke-full,” meaning “full to choking.” This dates to the 1400s and is found in *Morte d’Arthur*. It might also come from the verb “chokken,” as in the Middle English phrase “chokken togeder,” crammed together.

Later, “chock” was used to mean a wedge of wood used to secure a moving object. The word was included in William Falconer’s *An universal dictionary of the marine*, 1769: “Chock, a sort of wedge used to confine a cask or other weighty body, when the ship is in motion.”

A block and tackle is a pulley system used on sailing ships to hoist the sails. Chock-a-block describes what occurs when the sail is raised to its fullest extent, when there is no more rope free and the blocks jam tightly together. The earliest example in print appears to be in 1840.

“Chock-a-block” spawned an abbreviated version in the 1900s—chocka (or chocker). This was WWII British military slang and meant “fed-up or disgruntled.”

One last quote, from Somerset Maugham, 1946: “The city’s inns were chock-a-block, and men were sleeping three, four and five in a bed.” Definitely chock-a-block!

CHUFFED

The current meaning is: delighted, pleased, or satisfied. But, when it originated, around 1830, it meant something negative.

Norman W. Schur’s *British English A to Zed* (2001) says: “This curious bit of antiquated army slang has two diametrically opposite meanings, depending on the context. One can say chuffed pink (tickled pink) to mean ‘pleased’ or dead chuffed to mean ‘displeased’ or ‘choked’.” *The Oxford English Dictionary* agrees.

I’ve also heard someone say, “Well, I’ll be chuffed,” as in, “I’ll be damned.”

CLAPTRAP

“Claptrap” is pretentious nonsense.

It first appeared in print in Nathan Bailey’s dictionary of 1721 and his definition explains the word very well. “A Clap Trap, a name given to the rant and rhimes that dramattick poets, to please the actors, let them get off with: as much as to say, a trap to catch a clap, by way of applause from the spectators at a play.”

Other writers agreed that such nonsense had no place on the stage. One such writer in *The New-England Magazine* in 1835, fulminated against the star system that was contributing to the decline of the modern drama, and complained that to feed the performance of the lead actor, “The piece must abound in clap-traps.” An article in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1855 about a new play said, “All the clap-traps of the press were employed to draw an audience to the first representation.”

Claptrap appears in venues other than theater. In 1867, in London, England, Thomas Wright wrote in *Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes* that: “The Waggoner’s entertainment, of course, embraced the usual unauthenticated statistics, stock anecdotes, and pieces of clap-trap oratory of the professional teetotal lecturers.”

In the mid-1800s, someone invented a mechanical clapper that made a noise like people applauding. From there we’ve progressed to laugh-tracks. It’s enough to make a cat cry.

CLOUD-CUCKOO-LAND

“Cloud-cuckoo-land” is a realm of fantasy, an ideal state where everything is perfect. Oddly, the phrase began as all one word and now is hyphenated. Most phrases evolve the other way round.

This long word was coined by Aristophanes, a Greek playwright. His drama, *The Birds*, first performed in 414 BC, has the Athenian, Pisthetaerus, persuading the world’s birds to create a

new city in the sky named Nubicuculia or Cloud Cuckoo Land, thus gaining control over all communications between men and gods.

A person who lives in “cloud-cuckoo-land” is someone, like the Queen in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, who says, “Sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” She may be seen as crazy, but she made some insightful comments.

Cockaigne, in medieval myth, resembles cloud-cuckoo-land. It was an imaginary place of extreme luxury and ease where the harshness of medieval peasant life did not exist.

The phrase has often been used by politicians and writers. It represented Hollywood in Stella Gibbons’s *Cold Comfort Farm*. Dorothy Sayers, in the Author’s Note to her novel *Gaudy Night* (1936), explains that the story, while set in Oxford, is entirely fictitious, concluding that “...the novelist’s only native country is Cloud-Cuckooland, where they do but jest.”

COAL IN (ONE’S) STOCKING

If you get a lump of coal instead of candy in your Christmas stocking, you’ve been naughty. The tradition of giving lumps of coal to misbehaving children goes back far enough to be linked with St. Nicholas, Sinterklaas, and Italy’s La Befana.

Santa, St. Nick, and La Befana get into people’s homes via the fireplace chimney and leave gifts in stockings hung from the mantel or in any shoes left nearby. Sinterklaas’s assistant, Black Pete, also comes down the chimney and places gifts in shoes.

All these Santa figures are tied to the fireplace. So, if the Santas found kids who didn’t deserve a present, they encouraged better behavior by leaving something no kid would want. Coal fireplaces were very common during the 1800s and early 1900s, and nothing could be easier than reaching down and grabbing a lump of coal. These Santas also might leave bundles of twigs, bags of salt, garlic, or onions.

Before the 1820s, when coal began to be adopted, many people still burned wood in their hearths. Instead of coal, naughty children received stones, fresh whips in the form of small branches, ashes, or cold potatoes as punishment. But, as coal gained ascendance in keeping houses warm, it begins to appear in Christmas stories.

Many stories from the early 1900s show poor families happily receiving coal. New methods of mining, shipping, and burning began to make coal so available that the wealthy might not have hesitated to give it to children as a punishment (or a joke). As it became affordable, that changed and, by the 1920s, coal’s status as a punishment for bad children appeared everywhere in print. By the end of the decade, coal was a fondly remembered Christmas tradition.

If you’d like to carry on the tradition, you can apparently purchase coal via the internet as a gag Christmas gift. Of course, if you’re cold you can burn it instead. No children will object.

COAL IN SEVEN LUMPS

Here are seven ways that the word “coal” is used.

Haul (someone) over the coals — to reprimand a person severely for an error or mistake. The earliest print record of the phrase appears in 1565, in the Catholic Church’s practice of dragging or raking heretics over coals as a form of torture. When someone was suspected of going against the church’s preaching or practicing witchcraft, they had to survive being dragged over burning coals to be declared innocent. If they burned to death, they were considered guilty. No, there is no logic whatsoever in that theory.

Heap coals of fire on (one’s) head — go overboard in creating feelings of guilt or remorse in someone. This phrase is of biblical origin: “if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head” (Romans 12:20).

At the coalface — When people talk about those “at the coalface,” they mean the people who are actually doing the job, those who really know about the profession. The expression comes from coal mining. The coalface is the place where coal is being cut out of the rock, a dirty, hazardous job done in dark and cramped conditions.

Blow the coals — to turn a minor issue into a major source of conflict. The phrase probably arose from the task of coaxing a smoldering flame into a fire by blowing on the hot coals.

Rake over old coals — to revisit, dredge up, or talk about something that happened in the past, especially something unpleasant.

Pour on the coal — to increase one’s speed, effort, or energy. It means the same thing as “step on the gas” in driving a car. The expression is an allusion to the coal-burning engines of trains and ships. It has since been transferred to other vehicles and other endeavors.

Canary in a coal mine — something or someone who acts as an early warning of danger. The phrase arises from the former practice of taking caged canaries into coal mines. If the air was bad enough to kill the canary (more sensitive than humans to deadly fumes), it would soon be bad enough to kill people. So, the death of the canary would warn the miners to get out. The practice was phased out in the US and the UK by the late 1900s, but the phrase lives on as a metaphor.

COCK A SNOOK

“Cocking a snook” is a sign of derision or contempt, made by putting the thumb on the nose, holding the palm open and perpendicular to the face, and wagging the fingers. It is used mostly by children, often combined with verbal insults, sticking out the tongue or blowing a raspberry. Americans call it the “the five-fingered salute.” It is also known as thumbing the nose, Anne’s Fan or Queen Anne’s Fan. Nobody knows where or how it originated.

The first written reference to the phrase appears to be from *Wynne’s Diary*, 1791: “They cock snooks at one on every occasion.”

The word “snook” seems to mean the nose, but the only official use of “snook” is as the name of a fish. The word “cock” has several meanings, but in this case, I would compare it to cocking a gun. You could say that you’re cocking your nose to fire insult at someone.

My father used to cock his snook sometimes, but he called it “thumbing my nose,” and to him it meant “kiss my ass.” And that meant, “Don’t be ridiculous.”

COCKPIT

A “cockpit” can be one of several things:

- a space, often enclosed, in the forward fuselage of an airplane containing the flying controls, instrument panel, and seats for the pilot and co-pilot or flight crew
- a sunken, open area, generally in the after part of a small vessel, such as a yacht, providing space for the pilot, part or all of the crew, and guests
- the space, including the seat and instrumentation, surrounding the driver of an automobile
- a pit or enclosed place for cockfights
- a place where a contest is fought, or which has been the scene of many contests or battles

“Cockpit” was used as a nautical term in the 1600s. It referred to an area in the back end of a ship where the cockswain’s station was located, the cockswain being the pilot of a smaller boat that could be dispatched from the ship to board another ship or to bring people ashore. By the 1700s, “cockpit” had come to designate an area in the rear lower deck of a warship where the wounded were taken. The same term later came to designate the place from which a sailing vessel is steered, because it is also located in the rear, and is often in a well or “pit.”

The original meaning of “cockpit,” noted in the 1580s, is “a pit for fighting cocks.” The fighting area for cocks (a popular recreation of the time, along with bull- and bearbaiting) was thought of as a pit. It was a roughly circular enclosure, fitted up with rows of seats like a smaller version of the Roman amphitheater so that the spectators could look down on the action.

According to the *Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology*, the London buildings where the king’s cabinet worked (Treasury and Privy Council) were called the “Cockpit” because they were built on the site of a theater called *The Cockpit* (torn down in 1635), which itself was built in the place where a “cockpit” for cockfighting had once stood prior to the 1580s. Thus, the word “cockpit” came to mean a control center.

“Cockpit” was adopted by pilots in World War I, to describe the cramped operating quarters of their fighter planes. Modern use of “cockpit” includes the entire crew area, or flight deck, of a large airliner, which is usually fairly spacious.

Female pilots call it the “box office.”

COCKTAIL

A “cocktail” is an alcoholic mixed drink, either a combination of spirits, or one or more spirits mixed with other ingredients such as fruit juice, lemonade, syrup, or cream. Non-alcoholic mixed

drinks resembling cocktails are known as “mocktails” or “virgin cocktails.”

More specifically, “cocktail” means a beverage with at least three flavors, only one of which is alcohol. More specifically still, it must contain alcohol, a sugar, and a bitter/citrus. When a mixed drink contains only a distilled spirit and a mixer, such as soda, it is a highball.

The first recorded use of “cocktail” as a drink is found in *The Morning Post and Gazetteer* in London, England, March 20, 1798.

One theory as to the origin of the word comes from horses. In the early 1600s, it was customary to dock the tails of horses that were not thoroughbreds, to identify them as inferior. They were called cocktailed horses, later simply cocktails. The word “cocktail” was also applied to a vulgar person assuming the position of a gentleman but deficient in gentlemanly breeding. In 1806, one writer concluded that a cocktail might be an acceptable alcoholic drink, but noted that it was diluted, not “purebred.”

A second theory holds that the name is derived from the term “cock tailings,” a drink resulting from tavern owners combining the dregs (tailings) of nearly empty barrels together into a single elixir that was sold at bargain prices. That only makes sense when you know that the spigot of a barrel was sometimes referred to as a “cock.”

A third theory is mentioned in the book *Imbibe!* (2007), by David Wondrich, where he speculates that “cocktail” is a reference to a practice for perking up an old horse by means of a ginger suppository so that the animal would “cock its tail up and be frisky.”

I can think of kinder ways to make a horse frisky.

The first publication of a bartenders’ guide including cocktail recipes was in 1862 – *How to Mix Drinks*; or, *The Bon Vivant’s Companion*, by “Professor” Jerry Thomas. In addition to recipes for punches, sours, slings, cobblers, shrubs, toddies, flips, and a variety of other mixed drinks were 10 recipes for “cocktails,” the key ingredient being the use of bitters.

The first “cocktail party” ever thrown was allegedly by Mrs. Julius S. Walsh Jr. of St. Louis, Missouri, in May 1917. Walsh invited 50 guests to her home at noon on a Sunday. The party lasted an hour, until lunch was served at 1 pm.

Prohibition in the US (1919–1933), saw illegal alcoholic beverages consumed in “speakeasies.” There was a shift from whiskey to gin, which does not require aging and is therefore easier to produce illicitly. Honey, fruit juices, and other flavorings served to mask the foul taste of the inferior liquors. Sweet cocktails were easier to drink quickly, an important fact when the establishment might be raided at any moment. Also, the faster the customers drank, the more liquor they would buy.

The US government itself intentionally poisoned certain alcohol supplies that they knew Americans would drink, killing at least 10,000 people. At the time, alcohol and those who drank it were commonly blamed for most of the problems with the world.

Cocktails weren't so popular in the 1960s and 1970s but resurged in the 1980s with vodka often substituting for gin in drinks such as the Martini. Traditional cocktails began to make a comeback in the 2000s, creating a renaissance of cocktail culture in a style referred to as "mixology." Inspired by traditional cocktails, it uses novel ingredients and often complex flavors.

The Margarita, which first became popular in the 1980s remains the best-selling cocktail today. Its popularity may be attributable to the simplicity of its recipe — lime juice, orange liqueur and a healthy slug of tequila.

CODGER

A "codger" is an old man, especially one who is eccentric or a curmudgeon.

The word probably comes from "cadger," the name of itinerant dealers who traded in butter and eggs and so on, which they transported by packhorse. "Cadger" dates from the 1400s and was referred to in Robert Henryson's *The Morall Fabillis of Esope*, circa 1450.

Another theory, for which there is no evidence, states that "codger" is related to falconry. Elderly falconers were given the job of carrying frames, called "cadges," used to transport falcons.

The "beg or borrow" meaning of cadge was long in use as a general term for "obtaining without payment." It was applied to beggars, smugglers, and tramps.

Men who fell on hard times and had to resort to any means to get food were often too old to find work. A cadger was probably a gray-haired character wanting to borrow or steal. A codger was a peculiar chap, and both were likely to be old. "Old codger" could be the linguistic merging of all those images.

The word has mellowed over the years. Now "codger" is an affectionate word for an older man.

So, is a female codger a codgette?

COLD TURKEY

To "go cold turkey" means to withdraw suddenly and completely from addictive substances, such as alcohol, heroin, and chocolate cake, and endure the resulting unpleasant experience. Also, predominantly in the USA, it means plain speaking.

The *OED* says the phrase first appeared in print in the early 1900s. Such phrases are often in use for years before they make it into print, so it may actually be much older. Its origin is unclear.

It has been suggested that "cold turkey" comes from the observation that when an addict is in withdrawal, his blood is directed to the internal organs, leaving the skin white and with goose bumps, looking like raw turkey skin.

Or it could have evolved from the older idiom “talk turkey.” Since the latter phrase meant “to speak frankly and plainly,” to quit something “cold turkey” might have naturally followed to mean abandoning something with similar directness.

Scholars have suggested the UK satirical magazine *Judy* as the true source of “cold turkey.” *Judy*’s January 3, 1877, issue printed the fictional diary of one John Hume, Esquire. Hume goes to stay with his cousin Clara for Christmas and is shocked that Clara serves him slices of cold turkey, rather than hot, roasted, and dressed turkey, for several days. Disgusted at having been treated so badly, Hume chops Clara completely out of his will.

The theory is that Hume’s having given Clara “the cold turkey treatment” quickly spread around London, greater Europe, and finally the US. Over the decades, cutting someone off in this way came to include cutting something off, as in today’s “quitting [a substance] cold turkey.”

This example from *The Des Moines Daily News*, May 1914 illustrates the use of “cold turkey” as speaking plainly: “I’ve heard [Reverend Billy] Sunday give his ‘Booze’ sermon and, believe me, that rascal can make tears flow out of a stone. And furthermore, he talks ‘cold turkey.’ You know what I mean — calls a spade a spade.”

“Cold turkey” means no-nonsense talking and no-nonsense action.

COLLYWOBBLES

A state of intestinal disorder, sometimes accompanied by a rumbling stomach. It’s also employed figuratively to refer to the fluttering in the tummy caused by nervousness or apprehension.

The origin isn’t known but it may have been a nonsense word created from “colic” plus “wobble.”

The nonsense theory is supported by two early references, used in a humorous way:

—*Punch* October 1841: “To keep him from getting the collywobbles in his pandenoodles.”

—Cuthbert Bede, *The Adventures of Mister Verdant Green*, 1853: “A touch of the mulligrubs in your collywobbles?”

The earliest recording of the term is from Pierce Egan’s edition of *Grose’s Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, 1823: “Collywobbles, the gripes.”

Another theory is that collywobbles described an illness caused by breathing coal dust. “Colly” is an English dialect word meaning coal dust. Thus, blackbirds were known as colly birds. The line in *Twelve days of Christmas* which says that my true love sent to me “four calling birds” should be “four colly birds.”

Some say it’s the result of uneducated people converting the medical term *cholera morbus* into an everyday word.

I like the word collywobbles. It's what we'd call now a "fun" word, like this one: *Coddiwomple* — travel in a purposeful manner toward a vague destination.

I think that's a great way to travel, though airports sure wouldn't let me do it.

COMPUTER COOKIE

A computer cookie is not a ginger snap or a shortbread that you eat while working at your computer.

When you visit a website, the website sends an electronic cookie to your computer, which stores it in a file inside your web browser. The term "cookie" was coined by web-browser programmer Lou Montulli in 1994.

Computer cookies are simple text files containing small pieces of data which websites use to identify your computer as you surf the Web, streamlining your web experiences. As an example, many online retailers use cookies to keep track of the items in a user's shopping cart as they explore the site. Without cookies, your shopping cart would reset to zero every time you clicked a new link on the site. That would make online shopping more than a tad frustrating!

Cookies are also used to remember pieces of information that the user previously entered into form fields, such as names, addresses, passwords, as well as payment card numbers, operating as a kind of bookmark. Another use is to keep a record of your most recent visit or to record your login information.

Different types of cookies keep track of different activities. For example:

—Session cookies are used only when a person is actively navigating a website; once you leave the site, the session cookie disappears.

—Tracking cookies may be used to create long-term records of multiple visits to the same site, a potential privacy concern that prompted new laws in 2011 which require websites to gain "informed consent" from users before storing non-essential cookies on their devices. Shopping sites use cookies to track items users previously viewed, allowing the sites to customize advertising by suggesting other goods users might like, and to keep items in shopping carts while they continue shopping.

—Authentication cookies track whether a user is logged in, and if so, under what name.

Under normal circumstances, cookies cannot transfer viruses or malware to your computer. Because the data in a cookie doesn't change when it travels back and forth, it has no way to affect how your computer runs.

But some viruses and malware can be disguised as cookies. For instance, a "zombie cookie" re-creates itself after being deleted, making them tough to manage. Third-party tracking cookies can also cause some security and privacy concerns, and make it easier for unidentifiable parties to watch where you go and what you do online.

But there are ways to manage your cookies to protect your privacy online. Open your browser

and find where cookies are stored, usually under a heading such as “Settings>Privacy.” You will find a range of options for enabling or deleting cookies. A setting that controls or limits third-party and tracking cookies can help protect your privacy while still allowing you to shop online and carry out similar activities.

However, banning all browser cookies could make some websites difficult or impossible to navigate. Without cookies, internet users may have to re-enter their data for each visit. It’s best to find a middle ground if you can.

You may be able to achieve anonymity by using a virtual private network (VPN). These services tunnel your web connection to a remote server that poses as you. Cookies will be labeled for that remote server in another country, instead of your local computer. VPNs require another learning curve, of course, and they charge for their services.

If you’re up for a LOT of technical detail, check out “computer cookies” on Wikipedia. There are many other sites, as well, that explain how cookies work.

COUNTING SHEEP

Counting sheep is a mental discipline used as a way of putting oneself to sleep.

What you’re supposed to do is imagine an endless series of identical white sheep jumping over a fence and count them as they go. Presumably, occupying the mind with something this simple, repetitive, and rhythmic will be so boring that you fall asleep.

An early reference to counting sheep as a way falling sleep can be found in *Illustrations of Political Economy* by Harriet Martineau, 1832: “It was a sight of monotony to behold one sheep after another follow the adventurous one, each in turn placing its fore-feet on the breach in the fence, bringing up its hind legs after it, looking around for an instant from the summit, and then making the plunge into a dry ditch, tufted with locks of wool. Recollection of the scene of transit served to send the landowner to sleep more than once.”

The practice has been so commonly represented in cartoons, comic strips, and other mass media that it is deeply ingrained in popular culture. The term “counting sheep” is now an idiom for insomnia.

There are many references to counting sheep in contemporary culture, including Philip K. Dick’s science fiction novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

If it’s sheep we’re going to count, why not black ones?

CRACKPOT

A person with senseless, wild ideas, an eccentric, a crank.

Some people might assume the word is related to drugs because crack and pot are slang words

for different drugs. However, it comes from another source entirely.

The word developed from the combination of cracked and pot, and their original slang meanings. Something that is cracked is broken. In the 1600s, one of the slang meanings of cracked was a person with an impaired mind. This is because cracked was short for brain-cracked. And in John Canne's *A Necessity of Separation from the Church of England*, 1634, we find: "If Mr. Bradshaw had found such a reason in Mr. Johnson's writing, he would surely have called him idle head, cracked-brained, fool, etc."

The slang for pot goes back even further, all the way to the 1400s. Then, it could mean head. Therefore, crackpot was another way to say impaired head.

There exists a village called Crackpot, in Swaledale, Yorkshire. But the village existed long before "crackpot" came to mean crazy, as it dates from at least the 1100s, after the invasion of the Vikings. The Vikings called it Crakepot, which derives from the Norse terms "kraka," a crake or crow and "pot," a deep hole or pit — neither of which has anything to do with being crazy. Crackpot was merely "the hole where crows gather."

CROCODILE TEARS

Today, "crocodile tears" describes a display of false sorrow, but the saying actually derives from a medieval belief that crocodiles shed tears of sadness while they killed and consumed prey.

The myth comes from a 1300s book called *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. Wildly popular upon its release, the book recounts a brave knight's adventures during his supposed travels through Asia. Though factually inaccurate, Mandeville's account of weeping reptiles later found its way into the works of Shakespeare, and "crocodile tears" became an idiom in the 1500s.

Edmund Spenser refers to the story in *The Faerie Queene*, writing of the "cruel crafty" creature "which, in false grief, hiding his harmful guile / Doth weep full sore, and sheddeth tender tears."

While crocodiles can and do generate tears, the tears are not linked to emotion. Their lachrymal glands secrete a fluid behind their third eyelid, called a nictitating membrane. This fluid from their tear ducts functions to clean and lubricate the eye and is most prominent and visible when crocodiles have been on dry land for a while. In the case of American and saltwater crocodiles, the tears help get rid of the excess salt that they take in with their food.

However, evidence suggests the tears could also be triggered by feeding. Bogorad's syndrome is a condition which causes sufferers to shed tears while consuming food, so has been labelled "crocodile tears syndrome" with reference to the legend.

CUTE AS A BUG'S EAR

"Cute as a bug's ear" means charming and attractive and is usually used to describe a child. It may work on the idea that something smaller is always cuter. It was first seen in print in 1868.

The idiom makes no sense since bugs don't have ears. Many of them can detect sound, but none of them are equipped with anything resembling a human ear.

The phrase originated in the southern US in the latter part of the 1800s. But no one thought that bugs' ears were cute. What they did think, because insects can detect very minuscule and high-pitched sounds, is that they were "acute."

"Cute" meant the same as "acute" in 1700s England. Nathan Bailey defined it in *The Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, 1731: "Cute: sharp, quick-witted, shrewd."

From around the late 1800s, in the US, "cute" began to mean "pretty or charming" though the earlier meaning persisted for much longer in the UK, where it is still used. Mystery writer Agatha Christie once wrote, "She might be too cute to fall into the trap."

Similar phrases came later, all of them with the modern meaning of "pretty or adorable." For example: cute as a kitten, cute as a button, cute as a cupcake, cute as a bug in a rug.

And then there was James Joyce, who wrote in *Ulysses*, "...and cute as a shithouse rat." For some reason, this version didn't catch on.

CUT TO THE QUICK

"Cut to the quick" means to injure deeply or to wound, especially emotionally.

The *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* says, "The noun 'quick' comes from the Anglo-Saxon *cwicu*, meaning 'alive or living.'" Literary examples date at least to the early 1500s, in works by Shakespeare, Dryden, Swift, and Defoe, to name a few.

The phrase "You have cut me to the quick" is a holdover from the original meaning of the word. Literally, it means to cut through the skin to the living tissue. Figuratively, it means, "You have hurt my feelings."

Some other words still in use today which carry the original meaning of quick include quicklime, literally "living lime," quicksand meaning "living sand," and the noun "quick" referring to the living flesh beneath the dead fingernail.

QUICK BITES

CATAMOUNT — An old American folk term for a mountain lion (cat-a-mount), which arose from the Middle English "cat of the mountain." (1660s) A mountain cat may also be called a cougar or a puma, or a panther.

CATAWAMPUS — An imaginary fierce wild animal or hobgoblin. As an adjective, it means fierce, savage, destructive, askew, or cater-cornered. (US, 1864) The second element may be related to Scottish *wampish*, meaning "to wriggle or twist."

CATER-CORNERED — Diagonally placed or four-cornered. (American, 1880s) Kitty-cornered and catty-cornered are more common.

CATSPAW —

- (1) A person used or controlled by others: a puppet, instrument, pawn, dupe, stooge, tool.
- (2) A light ripple on a calm sea, indicating the end of the prevailing calm.
- (3) A hitch knot formed with two eyes for attaching a line to a hook.

CHASING RAINBOWS — Pursuing a useless quest (1450). We see rainbows when there is the right conjunction of sunlight and moisture in the air. Finding the ends of these tantalizing visions is impossible because they're optical illusions which require a certain amount of distance from the viewer to be seen. Darn, I guess I'll never find that pot of gold.

CHICANERY — Deception, trickery, sharp practice

CHICKENSHIT — Small-minded, contemptible, lacking courage (1929).

CHOP-CHOP — Hurry! Origin: British-occupied south China (1830s).

CHORTLE — Another lovely word coined by Lewis Carroll and used in "Jabberwocky" (*Through the Looking Glass* 1871. Probably a combination of chuckle and snort. The current meaning is "joyful laughter."

CONNIPTION FIT — Sudden burst of hysterical excitement or anger (1825-35).

COUTH — This once meant familiar, but now means cultured, refined, well-mannered.

COUTHIE — Sociable, unsophisticated, comfortable, 1715-25, Scottish.

COWABUNGA — An exclamation used to express delight or satisfaction or amazement. (1950s) The word was first popularized on the US television program *Howdy Doody* (1947–60). It later became associated with surfing culture and was further popularized by use on the US television cartoon program *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1987–96).

CROTCHETY — Given to crotchets or subject to whims, crankiness, or ill temper. (1825) "Crotchet" means a small hook, a brooch, a peculiar device, or a highly individual and usually eccentric opinion or preference which may result in the aforesaid crankiness.



— D —

DAMN THE TORPEDOES! FULL SPEED AHEAD!

A command to go as fast as you can, at maximum power.

The saying is credited to David Glasgow Farragut (1801-1870) - a US naval officer, who became famous for his service to the Union during the American Civil War. In 1864, at the Battle of Mobile Bay, he refused to retreat, shouting the now famous phrase.

During the Civil War, Union ships imposed a blockade on Confederate ports. One of the few ports to defy the blockade was Mobile in Alabama. In August 1864, Farragut was tasked with closing the port, thus completing the blockade of Southern ports. Mobile was heavily protected, both by onshore batteries and by tethered naval mines, known as torpedoes.

Farragut ordered his fleet to charge the bay but, when one of the lead boats struck a mine and sank, the others pulled back. From his perch high up on the main mast of his flagship, the USS Hartford, Farragut shouted down (using a trumpet), "What's the trouble?" In response, he was told of the torpedoes. To which he apparently replied, "Damn the torpedoes. Four bells, Captain Drayton, go ahead. Jouett, full speed."

The bulk of Farragut's fleet (consisting of four monitors and fourteen wooden steamships) successfully entered the bay and, despite shelling from the guns at Fort Morgan, defeated Admiral Franklin Buchanan's squadron of three gunboats and the large ironclad CSS Tennessee, blowing a hole in the latter, causing Buchanan to run up the white flag in surrender.

In 1864, Lincoln promoted Farragut to vice admiral. He was made full admiral in 1866.

DEAD RECKONING

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that "dead reckoning" means "Estimation of a ship's position from the distance run by the log and the courses steered by the compass, with corrections for current, leeway, etc., but without astronomical observations." The explanation applies to both ships and aircraft.

Wikipedia says, "Dead reckoning is subject to cumulative errors. Advances in navigational aids that give accurate information on position, in particular satellite navigation using the Global Positioning System, have made simple dead reckoning by humans obsolete for most purposes. However, inertial navigation systems, which provide very accurate directional information, use dead reckoning and are very widely applied."

"Dead reckoning" also describes the process of estimating the value of any variable quantity by using an earlier value and adding whatever changes have occurred in the meantime. The earlier value and the changes may be measured or calculated quantities.

One persistent theory says the phrase should be “ded reckoning,” meaning “deduced reckoning,” but this is quite wrong. As with many unacceptable theories, there’s an element of plausibility plus a great deal of enthusiasm to conclude that two and two equal five.

The phrase originated in the early 1600s. The word “dead” is used as an adjective in the sense of “unrelieved; unbroken; absolute; complete; exact” just the same as it’s used in “dead center,” and “dead ahead.” Or, perhaps, “you’re dead if you don’t reckon right.”

In animal navigation, dead reckoning is more commonly known as path integration. Animals such as ants, rodents, and geese track their locations continuously relative to a starting point and return to it, an important skill for foragers with a fixed home.

DEAD RINGER

“Dead ringer” means an exact duplicate.

“Ringer” is slang for a look-alike horse substituted for another in a competition or sporting event to defraud the bookies. It originated in the US horse-racing world in the late 1800s. The *Manitoba Free Press* defined it in October 1882: “A horse taken through the country and trotted under a false name and pedigree is called a ‘ringer.’”

“Dead” usually means lifeless but can also mean “exact” or “precise,” as in: dead shot, dead center, dead heat, dead right, and dead ahead.

Occasionally someone on the internet puts forward the theory that “dead ringer” refers to people who were prematurely buried and who pulled on bell ropes that were attached to their coffins to attract attention.

Interesting explanation but it’s dead in the water.

DIBS

The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the following meanings of the word dibs:

- A child's game (also called dibbs, or dibstones) with pebbles or the knucklebones of sheep; also used as the name of the play pieces (late 1600s)
- A child’s word to make first claim on something (1907)
- A counter used in card games as a substitute for money
- A slang term for money (1808)
- A depression in the ground, a variant of dip (1821)

Dibstones is known to have been played since 1693 since it was recorded in the English philosopher Jock Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, published that year. But it is probably older than that.

“Dib” originally was a verb meaning “to dab” or “to pat.” The game of dibstones was much like the game of jacks, often involving tossing up small objects and catching them on the backs of

hands. Other forms of dibstones were like the game of marbles.

As for privilege, it's likely that the game allowed a player to gain privileges over their opponents if the dibs went a certain way. Or perhaps dibs was influenced by dubs, a shortened form of double that is used in the game of marbles as an exclamation to declare one's right to two marbles knocked outside the ring of play. If dibs came to be used in a similar way, it is possible that its meaning broadened during the 1900s to convey the more general sense of "rights" or "claim" that it possesses today.

As to the "money" sense, here's H. G. Wells, in *The War in the Air*: "He thought the whole duty of man was to be smarter than his fellows, get his hands, as he put it, 'on the dibs,' and have a good time."

Dibs and dibstones originated in England but all the early citations of "first dibs" are from the USA, beginning in the early 1900s.

As a child I got first dibs on the icing bowl.

DIDDLY-SQUAT

"Diddly-squat" is a very small amount, or nothing at all. Example: "She didn't care diddly-squat about Darryl."

The word "diddly" itself means "a thing of little or no value, or a flaw, a malfunction."

The word "squat" is a euphemism for "shit," which comes from the act of squatting to defecate. In more direct but less polite language, "She didn't give a shit about Darryl."

The Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang suggests that this is a variation of "doodly-squat" from 1934, probably from American slang doodle (excrement) plus squat, used in the sense of defecating. Doodly-squat was originally the more common form, but diddly-squat overtook it in the early 1980s.

The following explanation is offered by *Why You Say It: The Fascinating Stories Behind over 600 Everyday Words and Phrases* by W. Garrison: "Carneys (carnival workers) who traveled from town to town working one county fair after another developed their own private language. They had to do so to attract potential gamblers who would pay for a chance at a gimcrack prize. 'Diddle-e-squat' seems to have entered the carnival talk to name money — often a nickel or a dime, since that was the going rate for a game of chance. Frequently used to hide talk about a small amount of money, it was an easy and natural transition for the carnival term to indicate very little of anything."

So, diddly means the same thing as squat and diddly-squat is just doubling up on the information. It's one of the formations that makes the language both weird and interesting at the same time.

DIEHARD

A “diehard” is a person who strongly opposes change or else continues to support something in spite of opposition. Such a person may hold stubbornly to a minority view, in defiance of the circumstances. Some synonyms: hard-core, traditionalist, steadfast, inflexible, uncompromising, unyielding, indomitable, rigid, set in one’s ways.

“Diehard” originally had a much more literal meaning, which was to die hard, or reluctantly, resisting to the end.

In its earliest incarnation in the 1700s, the expression was used for condemned men who struggled the longest when they were executed by hanging. Records show that some of those who were about to be hanged opted to hurry things up, and paid people to hang onto their legs so that they died quickly.

The phrase became even more popular after the 1811 Battle of Albuera during the Napoleonic Wars. During the fight, a wounded British officer named William Inglis supposedly urged his unit forward by bellowing “Stand your ground and die hard . . . make the enemy pay dear for each of us!” Inglis’ 57th Regiment suffered 75 percent casualties during the battle and went on to earn the nickname “the Die Hards.”

DIRT POOR

Poverty-stricken, lacking most of the necessities of life. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “dirt poor” is an American expression first documented in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, and refers to the Dust Bowl.

Note that “dirt” as a synonym for “soil” is also an American invention. The following phrases were all coined in the US: dirt farmer, dirt road, hit pay dirt, eat dirt, and do someone dirt.

In the poorest houses, the floor might be packed dirt, but those who could afford them had wooden floors.

“Dirt poor” first appears in print in Edna Ferber’s 1931 novel, *American Beauty*. During the bitter Dust Bowl era, thousands of Great Plains farmers lost everything except the dirt of their unworkable farms, now worthless. Then huge dust storms made sure that they even lost the dirt needed to grow crops. These dust storms also created an unusual amount of dirtiness, blowing sand and dust into their buildings and heaping it over abandoned equipment.

Pictures of those abandoned farms are a reminder that humans have no control over nature.

DISCOMBOBULATE

To embarrass, disturb, confuse, befuddle, or disconcert.

The word originated in the US and appeared in 1834. It’s a fanciful mock-Latin coinage of a type that was popular at the time. Here are some other examples:

confusticate — confuse (1852)
absquatulate — flee (1840)
spifflicate — confound (1850)
scrumplicate — eat (1890)

Various forms of the word included: discombobberate, discombobulate, discombooble, and conbobberate. Here's another one from an 1834 issue of the *New York Sun*: "May be some of you don't get discombobracated."

"Discombobulate" does not follow the same pattern as pairs like "comfort" and "discomfort." There is no such word as "combobulate."

Discombobulate appears to be just a nonsense alteration of "discompose" or "discomfort" but the "bobulate" part has no known origin. The *Dictionary of American Regional English* suggests that the "bob" in "discombobulate" may have come from "bobbery" (1816), which means a noisy disturbance, row, brawl.

DOGGEREL

"Doggerel" is poetry irregular in rhythm and in rhyme, often deliberately for comic effect. Or it can mean verse which has a monotonous rhythm, easy rhyme, and trivial meaning. The word is derived from the Middle English *dogerel*, meaning nonsense and may relate to the idea of something fit only for a dog. Appearing since ancient times in the literature of many cultures, it is characteristic of nursery rhymes and children's songs.

Doggerel is sometimes written as a parody of some more serious poem. Referring to a literary work as doggerel is generally an insult.

The Scottish poet William McGonagall (1825-1902) has become famous for his doggerel, which many remember with affection despite its seeming technical flaws, as in his poem "The Tay Bridge Disaster":

Oh! Ill-fated bridge of the silv'ry Tay,
I now must conclude my lay
By telling the world fearlessly without the least dismay,
That your central girders would not have given way,
At least many sensible men do say,
Had they been supported on each side with buttresses,
At least many sensible men confesses,
For the stronger we our houses do build,
The less chance we have of being killed.

Ogden Nash (1902-71) wrote what seems to be doggerel but is clever and entertaining despite its technical faults.

DOG IN THE MANGER

An individual who keeps something that he doesn't want merely to prevent someone else from getting it.

The story of *The Dog in the Manger* derives from an old Greek fable which comes in several different versions. The short form: "There was a dog lying in a manger who did not eat the grain, but who nevertheless prevented the horse from being able to eat anything either."

This fable illustrates the behavior of certain humans so well that "dog in the manger" has been used to mean, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, "A churlish person who will neither use something himself nor let another use it." (1500s)

Popular artistic allusions to the fable, or the idiom arising from it, were especially common during the 1800s. Such work, bordering on the cartoon, provided a profitable avenue for social commentary.

DOG ROBBER

A "dog robber" is a military officer's orderly, whose job is to acquire scarce goods, from military equipment to liquor or perfume, often staying barely within the letter of the law. In other words, someone skilled at foraging.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the term back to 1832, when it meant "scrounger," and to the American Civil War as an "officer's orderly or private servant." An obsolete meaning is "A contemptible person, especially one who steals scraps of food." In today's military, it is used to describe a soldier that makes problems disappear by whatever means necessary.

Jonathan Lighter's *Historical Dictionary of American Slang* offers this 1865 explanation: "I believe the origin of it is this: If an officer has such a man, he generally allows him to dine from the leavings on the table, so as the man gets what is the dog's share, he is called a dog robber."

And, just to be different, *Jackspeak of the Royal Canadian Navy* says the phrase refers to civilian clothes. Usually, it specifically means a sports jacket and tie.

The weight of the evidence for meaning is "scrounger." But the meaning "civilian clothes" is also in use. I have heard a British military man remark to his wife that he would wear his dog robbers to an afternoon tea party.

The big mystery here is how robbing a dog came to mean civilian clothes. Good luck with solving that one!

DOLDRUMS

Inactivity, stagnation, listlessness, or depression.

In the late 1700s, the word as applied to people meant dull or sluggish. This probably derived

from “dol,” meaning “dull” with its form taken from “tantrum.” A tantrum was a fit of petulance and passion, a doldrum was a fit of sloth and dullness.

Today we still say that a person suffering from the blahs is “in the doldrums.” And, in 2012, the *Oman Daily Observer* announced that, “While the US stock market roared ahead, Europe was left in the doldrums.”

But “doldrums” is also a nautical term that refers to the belt around the Earth near the equator, where sailing ships sometimes get becalmed on windless waters. This belt is called the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone, where the prevailing trade winds of the northern hemisphere blow southwest and collide with northeast trade winds of the southern hemisphere. Due to Earth’s rotation, the ITCZ shifts from season to season, causing both dry and rainy seasons in the northern and southern hemispheres.

This equatorial region wasn't named the “The Doldrums” until the mid 1800s. When reports of ships becalmed near the equator described them as being ‘in the doldrums,’ it was mistakenly thought that the reports were describing their location rather than their state. The earliest known reference to the region’s name was in 1855.

In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge chronicles the adventures and woes of a sailing vessel. Among the challenges was a time when the winds died, leaving the ship motionless, which the mariner describes like this:

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

DON’T CUT OFF YOUR NOSE TO SPITE YOUR FACE

A self-destructive over-reaction to a problem, damaging oneself more than the object of one’s anger.

The phrase dates to the 1100s. It may be associated with numerous legends of pious women disfiguring themselves to protect their virginity.

One example is that of Saint Ebba, the Mother Superior of the monastery of Coldingham Priory. In AD 867, Viking pirates from Zealand and Uppsala landed in Scotland. When news of the raid reached Saint Ebba, she gathered her nuns together and urged them to disfigure themselves, so that they might be unappealing to the Vikings. In this way, they hoped to protect their chastity. She demonstrated this by cutting off her nose and upper lip, and the nuns proceeded to do the same. The Viking raiders were so disgusted that they burned the entire building to the ground with the nuns inside.

So, who was over-reacting here?

The expression has since become a blanket term for self-destructive actions motivated purely by

anger or desire for revenge. For example, if a man was angered by his wife, he might burn down their house to punish her. However, burning down her house would also mean burning down his, along with all their possessions.

And who is the idiot here?

Revenge is sweet but, as some say, it's a dish best eaten cold. Let the emotions drain away and "cut off" your adversary's nose, not your own.

DON'T THROW THE BABY OUT WITH THE BATHWATER

This proverb warns against eliminating something good when trying to get rid of something bad. For example, before you send that old desk to the junkyard, check the drawers to see if there's anything of value still in them.

The phrase has been in use in English since the late 1800s but originated in the 1500s in Germany.

Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle, a German scholar, translated the phrase in an essay denouncing slavery entitled *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question* (1853). Carlyle disagreed with the establishment view on slavery that was held in his day, but he was not what we would call a freedom fighter. He compared the dirty bathwater to slavery (which should be discarded) and the baby to the useful service provided by the slaves (which should be kept). He suggested that blacks were born to be servants and were useful only in that role. His basic proposal was that blacks should be hired for life as servants and given payment, not kept as slaves.

The silly email that circulates the Internet as "Life in the 1500s" claims that in medieval times people shared bathwater and by the time that the baby was bathed the water was so murky that the baby was in danger of being thrown out unseen. That is utterly ridiculous, as any mother could tell you.

DOODLE

"Doodles" are random drawings or scribbles made while a person's attention is otherwise occupied.

The word doodle first appeared in the early 1600s to mean a fool or simpleton. It might derive from the German *Dudeltopf* or *Dudeldop*, meaning simpleton or noodle. It is the origin of the early 1700s verb to doodle, meaning "to swindle or make a fool of." The modern meaning emerged as a term for a politician who was doing nothing in office. Now it applies to anyone doing nothing.

The meaning "fool, simpleton" is intended in the song title *Yankee Doodle*, originally sung by British colonial troops during the American Revolutionary War.

Doodling and scribbling are often associated with young children, because of their lack of hand–eye coordination. But adults often doodle, too, sometimes out of boredom. The doodles include everything: cartoon versions of people, landscapes, geometric shapes, patterns, textures. Most people who doodle often remake the same shape or type of doodle throughout their lifetime.

According to a study published in the scientific journal *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, doodling can help us focus on the current situation or be used as a stress relieving technique. This is like fidgeting or pacing, also used to alleviate mental stress. Doodling is often incorporated into art therapy, encouraging its users to slow down, focus and de-stress.

Alexander Pushkin’s notebooks are celebrated for their marginal doodles, which include sketches of his friends’ profiles, hands, and feet. These notebooks are regarded as a work of art.

DOODLEBUG

“Doodlebug” is a nickname applied to several things.

It's usually used for antlions in their larval form. The antlion larva burrows into loose, dry, bare, sandy soil and constructs a cone-shaped pit by flipping loose soil out of the hole with its head.

The antlion begins a pit by moving backward and pressing its wide, flattened abdomen into the soil. This process creates a winding trail that is allegedly the source of the name “doodlebug,” because “to doodle” means to make aimless scribbles or sketches.

When the doodlebug is under the loose soil, the flipping starts. Using the head and long, sickle-shaped mandibles, the antlion digs down deeper and deeper into the soil by energetically throwing sand to the surface. The finished pit may be 1 to 2 inches across and deep.

Ants and sometimes other insects become food for the waiting antlion. A hapless ant slips into the pit. As it scrambles to crawl back out the top, grains of sand along the sides of the pit slide to the bottom and carry the ant closer to the open “jaws of doom.” An ant that reaches the bottom of the pit rarely escapes.

An antlion makes several pits as it grows, for as long as 3 years. They are difficult to find because they are usually motionless at the bottom of the pit. Also, they are tan or brown and usually camouflaged under a thin layer of dust or sand. The antlion is up to ½ inch long and its most prominent features are the sharp, thin, sickle-shaped mandibles extending from the front of the head.

A fully grown antlion forms a cocoon in the ground and transforms to the adult stage. Antlion adults are up to 2 inches long and look like damselflies or dragonflies. The adults are seldom seen because they are active at night.

Doodlebugs are not harmful, although they can bite. Children used to try coaxing doodlebugs out of their holes by reciting charms. Here’s one from the early 1900s, very similar to the old verse about ladybugs:

Doodlebug, doodlebug,
Come out of your hole;
Your house is on fire,
And your children will burn.

The term “doodlebug” has also been applied to:

- pill bugs and some beetles
- a simpleton or time-waster
- a scribbler or doodler
- a divining rod for locating oil deposits
- a World War II-era Nazi drone bomb (“buzzbomb”)
- a self-propelled rail car
- DIY tractors, usually made from old cars

“Doodlebug” is sometimes used as an endearment, maybe because it’s kind of a cute word. However, when I see all the other things it’s been used for, I think I’ll pass.

DOOHICKEY

A small object or gadget, especially one whose name the speaker doesn’t know or can’t recall. Synonyms are: thingamabob, thingamajig, whatchamacallit.

There are so many doohickeys in the world that we can’t know or remember the names for all of them. The word often refers to some small device, especially a mechanical one. In *The Tommyknockers*, author Stephen King writes, “You’re almost done with this part. Just solder that red wire to that point to the left of the long doohickey.”

We don’t know the source of doohickey, though it may be a blend of doodad (trivial or superfluous ornament) and hickey, which is usually a pimple or a love bite.

The first recorded example appeared in the magazine *Our Navy* in November 1914.

DOOZY

An extraordinary one of its kind, whether good or bad. A rollercoaster may offer a doozy of a ride, or you can have a doozy of a headache.

Some people think the word comes from Duesenberg, the name of a now-defunct car company that some say produced the finest American cars. The vehicles were known as Duesies in the 1920s and 1930s.

It’s a good story but doesn’t fly chronologically. “Doozy,” meaning “stylish” or “splendid,” according to the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, appeared first around 1903, some 17 years before the Duesenberg Motor Company began manufacturing passenger cars.

Another theory for the source is “daisy,” which at one time meant “a first-rate person or thing.” But, from the 1700s on, that was English slang for something specially appealing or excellent. It arrived in North America in the early 1800s to appear in Thomas Chandler Haliburton’s *The Clockmaker* of 1836: “I raised a four-year-old colt once, half blood, a perfect picture of a horse, and a genuine clipper, could gallop like the wind; a real daisy, a perfect doll, had an eye like a weasel...”

“Dozy” is spelled almost the same, and in North America means feeling sleepy. It was first recorded in eastern Ohio in 1916. If you are in Britain, though, it is popular slang for a stupid or annoying person. It’s often paired with an adjective, the most popular being “He’s a dozy pillock.”

And that’s a double insult, because “dozy” means stupid, and “pillock” means stupid.

But these three words offer a good range of meaning. Daisy means “good.” Doozy means “good or bad.” And dozy is definitely “bad.”

There are days when I can use all three words for the computer. And sometimes myself.

QUICK BITES

DACTYLONOMY — The ancient art of counting on your fingers. For expert dactylomonists, it was not just a matter of using the whole finger. After all, every finger has a knuckle, two joints and three bones (one joint and two bones for the thumb) and all of them, on both hands, were used to count to 9,999. Paintings exist from more than 4,000 years ago showing Egyptians counting in this way, and it was also common in classical Greece and Rome.

DELICIAE — To delight oneself, to feast and revel (obsolete).

DICK SMITHING — A slang term to describe a host who, when in the kitchen pouring drinks for guests, pours himself an extra shot. There might be several reasons why a person dick smiths an extra drink and, it’s his booze, so why not? There appears to be some sort of link to San Francisco. It has been suggested that Dick Smith was a band famous for the song “Swillbilly.”

DINGER — Any remarkable person or thing (obsolescent).

HUMDINGER — Any remarkable person or thing (set to music, perhaps).

DOGGING IT — Working slowly or just pretending to work.

DON'T SHUT THE BARN DOOR AFTER THE HORSE IS GONE — One shouldn’t waste time taking precautions when the damage has already been done. If the horse has already bolted, there’s no point shutting the barn door. The phrase is found in print as early as 1390.

DOUBLE-DOUBLE — Canadian slang for coffee with two creams and two teaspoons of sugar. It apparently began at “Timmy’s” (coffee chain Tim Horton’s) and is now used elsewhere as well.

DRAWING A BEAD — Taking careful aim with a gun or focusing on a goal (1830). The “bead” in this expression comes from the small metal knob that forms the front sight of a gun, and resembles the small beads of glass, amber, metal, wood, etc., used as ornaments.

DUFFLE — A coarse heavy woolen material with a thick nap, or a slang word for a sailor’s belongings, otherwise known as a seabag. Today, a “duffle bag” is typically canvas, and used for carrying sports gear and similar bulky objects. The name comes from Duffel, a town in Flanders, Belgium, where the thick duffel cloth originated in the 1600s.



— E —

EAT, DRINK, AND BE MERRY (OR SORRY)

“Eat, drink and be merry (for tomorrow we may die)” is a proverb that promotes enjoying life in the moment because we don’t know what tomorrow will bring. Ecclesiastes 8:15 says, “Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry.” Corinthians 15:32: “let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die.”

The phrase is often assumed to form the basis of Epicurean philosophy and an epicure is thought to be interested only in sensual pleasures, especially of good food and drink.

But Epicureanism, a Greek philosophy founded in the 4th century BCE, is far more like Buddhism. “No pleasure is a bad thing in itself, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail disturbances many times greater than the pleasures themselves.” Disturbances such as hangovers, liver disease, obesity, indigestion, and unwanted babies.

Epicureans believe that all human action is motivated by pleasure and pain. Pleasure comes from achieving our desires, or achieving the lack of desire, resulting in a state of tranquility, the highest pleasure of all.

Believing we always deserve the best of everything, whether it's food, fame, money, or power, often leads to unfulfilled desires, which cause us pain.

Epicurus believed that the human mind resides in the chest and is made up of atoms. When we die, those atoms break apart and our mind ceases to exist. Although he stated that gods exist (possibly to avoid getting in big trouble for being an atheist), he claimed that, as non-physical beings, they had no impact on our lives and didn’t care about humans. Thus, man is responsible for what he does, and what people become is a consequence of the choices they make.

Epicurus regarded fear of death as the primary cause of anxiety in human beings, this anxiety creating extreme and irrational desires. The elimination of fears and corresponding desires would leave people free to pursue knowledge, friendship, and a temperate life. Epicurus advised people to avoid the gods, and politics where possible.

One strength of Epicureanism was a sense of community. The fellowship of the Garden, as it was known, included women and slaves in an admirable example of philosophic camaraderie and personal caring. Friendship was the core of the garden community. Its members accepted the fact that they lived in an unpredictable existence with no resources but themselves. The Epicureans created for themselves a means of achieving peace of mind which was under their control.

The simplicity of Epicurean life: food from the garden, bread, water, a pot of cheese, a little wine, was and is appealing. Death is inevitable, the natural limit to life. Once that fact is recognized, life can be valued for its own sake and used more wisely.

EIGHT TO THE BAR

“Eight to the bar” is a 30s and 40s phrase used for up-tempo dance tunes, as a command to the rhythm section to emphasize 8 beats to every bar of music, making it feel like double-time (as opposed to 4 beats to a bar).

Boogie-woogie (later swing) tunes counted eight-to-the-bar and were, from the outset, dance music. The point of eight-to-the-bar was to be a count for a fast dancer, for jitterbug, Lindy hop, and swing style dances. So, the call to “beat it eight-to-the-bar” was a request from dancers to play up-tempo, with strong rhythm.

“Beat Me Daddy, Eight to the Bar” is a song written in 1940. It follows the American boogie-woogie tradition of syncopated piano music. The song was first recorded in 1940 by the Will Bradley orchestra.

Ray McKinley was a drummer and lead singer in the Jimmy Dorsey band in the 1930s. McKinley kicked off certain up-tempo songs by asking pianist Freddie Slack (nicknamed “Daddy”) to give him a boogie beat, or “eight to the bar.” The nickname “Daddy Slack” was also used in the 1941 recording by “Pig Foot Pete.”

ELBOW GREASE

Hard work, especially vigorous physical labor or effort.

The phrase is often applied to tasks like scrubbing a sink or sawing wood—your elbow bending and straightening in turn. It has long been said that the best sort of furniture polish is “elbow grease,” to mean there is no substitute for hard rubbing to create a lustrous shine.

The term was first used in the 1600s and is found in print in *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew* (1699). Other countries have similar expressions.

An 1889 book of proverbs included “elbow grease makes wealth increase.” The author elaborates, as follows, “elbow polish, or elbow grease, is a fine article in a household, and beats boar’s grease and goose grease into fits.” In other words, hard work beats out any number of fancy formulas for getting things clean or getting things done.

EYEWASH

Rubbish, humbug, or nonsense, intended to obscure or conceal real facts or motives; something said or done merely for appearance or effect.



— F —

FIELD DAY

A “field day” is a day of excitement, or the opportunity to indulge in something one wants to do rather than the usual routine stuff.

An example of how the term is mostly used today: “The press is going to have a field day if they get wind of this story.” It also describes the experience of being released from one’s usual work schedule, or from any routine.

The term “field day” was first used by the military to mean, literally, a day spent in field maneuvers, and first appears in print in 1723. *The Edinburgh Advertiser*, in May 1776, reports: “The officers, on a general field day, instead of commanding, are obliged to coax them [the soldiery] to go through their different maneuvers.”

During the 1800s, the phrase began to be used not only for any event that might happen in a field, such as hunting and scientific expeditions, but also for exciting or welcome events, such as entertainments and feasts.

FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE

If you “fight fire with fire,” you respond to an attack by using similar methods to those of the attacker. In other words, match aggression with aggression, meet violence with violence, or take an eye for an eye.

The source of this phrase was the firefighting by US settlers in the 1800s, though indigenous peoples have literally fought fire with fire since time immemorial.

The phrase is mostly used for the controlled burns and backfires that wildlife managers employ to burn fuel that could potentially feed a future wildfire. The burn creates a manmade firebreak, or gap, in combustible material to prevent wildfires from spreading. A fire needs oxygen and fuel, such as leaves and vegetation, to continue burning. Rob the fire of nourishment and you squelch the chemical reaction that produces it.

Grass and forest fires are natural occurrences. In a world free of humans, they’d still occur thanks to lightning strikes, sparks from falling rocks, volcanic activity, and the spontaneous combustion of organic materials. While an occasional burn might greatly inconvenience local human populations, it’s a part of the ecological cycle.

Some plants depend on fire as part of their reproductive cycle, while others evolved long ago to weather regular wildfires. Sequoia seeds, for example, remain dormant until fire breaks down the seeds’ outer coating. Thus, a careful, controlled burn can aid the environment.

FILIBUSTER

A filibuster is a political procedure where some members of a parliament continuously debate a proposed piece of legislation to delay or completely prevent a vote being taken on the proposal. It can be referred to as “talking a bill to death.”

This stalling tactic (or political stonewalling) came from Ancient Rome. One of the first known practitioners was Roman senator Cato the Younger. Cato would obstruct a measure by speaking continuously until nightfall. As the Roman Senate had a rule requiring all business to end by dusk, Cato’s long-winded speeches could forestall a vote.

Today, due to the often extreme length of time required for a successful filibuster, many speakers stray off-topic after exhausting the original subject matter. Speakers have read through laws from different states, recited speeches, and even read from cookbooks or phone books.

The ultimate source for our word “filibuster” is certainly a 1500s Dutch word meaning robber, pirate, or plunderer. Intermediate links may be English freebooter (1598), and the French *flibutor* (1587). The Spanish form *filibustero* (1600s) originally referred to French, Dutch, and English privateers and buccaneers on the Spanish American coasts.

FINE WORDS BUTTER NO PARSNIPS

Nothing is achieved by empty words or flattery.

The proverb is English and dates from the 1600s. It means that you should judge people by what they do, not by what they say.

Why parsnips? Because, at that time, potatoes were something new in the English diet. Other root vegetables, such as parsnips and turnips, were eaten instead, cooked, mashed, and liberally laced with butter. It was not until the mid-1500s that John Hawkins imported potatoes into Britain, and they became the national dish.

Nigel Rees, in *Oops, Pardon Mrs. Arden!*, quotes a stanza from *Epigrammes* of 1651 by a Thames waterman known as the Water Poet, John Taylor:

Words are but wind that do from men proceed;
None but Chamelions on bare Air can feed;
Great men large hopeful promises may utter;
But words did never Fish or Parsnips butter.

FIRST-FOOTING

In British and Manx folklore, the “first-foot” is the first person to enter your home on New Year’s Day, bringing good fortune for the coming year.

Generally, the first-footer should be a tall dark-haired male. If the first-footer enters the house empty-handed, that will bring bad luck. Instead, the first-foot should bring gifts, which can include: a silver coin, shortbread, or a black bun (a type of fruitcake), salt, coal, and a ‘wee

dram' of *uisge beatha* or 'the water of life,' the name given by ancient Celts to the fiery amber nectar now called Scotch whisky. These gifts represent prosperity, food, flavor, warmth for the house, and good cheer — the whisky is used to toast the new year.

Naturally, food and drink will be given to the first-foot and the other guests, and serious partying will continue. Immediately after midnight it is traditional to sing *Auld Lang Syne*.

The origin of first-footing is uncertain, though it's possible that many of the traditional Hogmanay celebrations were originally brought to Scotland by the invading Vikings in the early 8th and 9th centuries.

Traditionally, the first-footer should be someone who was not already in the house when midnight struck — hence the Scottish party tradition of having one guest leave just before midnight so they can turn around and knock on the door as the new year begins. Having a doctor or minister appear at the door as a first-footer is also bad luck — presumably due to their association with illness and death.

Several traditions should be observed on 31 December. These include cleaning the whole house, taking out the ashes from the fire, and paying off all debts before "the bells" of midnight.

In Scotland, celebrating the New Year is more important than Christmas, which was virtually banned for around 400 years. This dates back to the years of Protestant Reformation, when the stern kirk proclaimed Christmas as a Popish or Catholic feast and banned it. Up until the 1950s, many Scots worked on Christmas and celebrated their winter solstice holiday at New Year.

There are several New Year blessings, but I particularly like:

—Plenty potatoes and enough herring.

—Bread and cheese, butter and beef, and the flea's tooth, may it not be well.

FIT AS A FIDDLE

You're in good health and in fine shape.

This expression dates from at least the 1600s. A fiddle that is fit is well-tuned and in good shape can play terrific music. "Fiddle" was no doubt combined with the word "fit" because we all love alliteration.

"Fit" didn't originally mean healthy and energetic. When this phrase was coined, "fit" was used to mean suitable, seemly, correct, or proper. So, what is a "seemly fiddle"?

One theory suggests that: "As fit as a fiddle" used to be "as fit as a fiddler," because a fiddler jumped and danced around so much while playing that he had to be in good shape.

This theory makes sense. But the English language isn't always based on sense.

FLEA MARKET

A flea market (or swap meet) is a street market selling used goods.

Such a market is often seasonal, but some operate year-round, and the emphasis is on used goods, collectibles, antiques, and vintage clothing. Vendors need to be skilled in following retro and vintage trends, as well as selecting merchandise which will please their customers.

In Australia, they are also called “trash and treasure markets.” In the United Kingdom, they are known as car boot sales if the event takes place in a field or car park, as the vendors will sell goods from the boot (trunk) of their car. If the event is held indoors, then it is usually known as either a jumble sale, or a bring and buy sale. In Quebec and France, they are often called *Marché aux puces* (literally “flea market”).

While flea markets have operated for millennia, the origin of the term is disputed. According to one theory, the Fly Market in 1700s New York City, located at Maiden Lane near the East River in Manhattan began the association. The land on which the market took place was originally a salt marsh with a brook, and by the early 1800s the “Fly Market” was the city’s principal market. A second theory maintains that “flea market” is labelled as such because the items sold were previously owned and well-used and supposedly contained fleas.

My favorite flea markets are second-hand bookstores. No little bloodsuckers in those pages!

FLIBBERTIGIBBET

A frivolous, flighty, or whimsical person, usually a young woman.

The phrase arose around the 1540s, probably a nonsense word meant to sound like babbling, but by 1600, it also was used as the name of a devil or fiend.

Shakespeare used the word, which he got from Samuel Harsnett’s *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603), where one reads of 40 fiends which Jesuits cast out and among which was Fliberdigibbet. In his *King Lear* (1605), Edgar uses it for a demon or imp: “This is the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet. ... He gives the web and the pin, squints the eye, and makes the harelip; mildews the white wheat, and hurts the poor creature of earth.”

Not surprisingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists 15 spellings.

FLIM-FLAM

“Flim-flam” describes a confidence trick, also deceptive, nonsensical, or insincere talk. Synonyms are: rip-off, con, scam, grift, hustle, swindle, gaffle, bunco, and bamboozle.

So many words for cheating really raises your respect for your fellow man, doesn’t it?

The word was first used in the mid-1500s, and the source is unknown.

A “flim-flam” is a scheme to defraud a person or group after first gaining their trust. Confidence tricks exploit the human characteristics of credulity, naïveté, compassion, vanity, irresponsibility, and greed. The intended victims are known as marks, suckers, stooges, mugs, rubes, or gulls (from the word gullible). When accomplices are employed, they are known as shills.

In the US, Mr. Samuel Thompson (1821–1856) was the original “confidence man.” Thompson was a clumsy swindler who asked his victims to express confidence in him by giving him money or their watches, rather than gaining their confidence in a more subtle way. Thompson was arrested in July 1849. The *National Police Gazette* coined the term “confidence game.”

The victim is usually given an opportunity to profit from a scheme, thus encouraging his greed, which often impairs a rational judgment of the situation. The victim receives a small payout as proof that the scheme works. In a gambling con, the victim is allowed to win several small bets. In a stock market con, the victim is given fake dividends. A sudden crisis or change of events forces the victim to act immediately. This is the point at which the con succeeds or fails.

The shill aids the conman by putting money into the same scheme as the victim, making it look legitimate. Or he may play the part of an uninvolved and skeptical third party, who later confirms the con man’s claims.

Flin Flon Flim-Flam was the title of an article about a flap in a Manitoba mining company.

Flip-Flop Flim-Flam headed an article in *Mother Jones* about politics.

FLOTSAM AND JETSAM

“Flotsam and jetsam” are odds and ends, bits and pieces, useless or discarded objects.

Flotsam and jetsam are usually used together nowadays though the words, in a variety of spellings, have separate meanings and were frequently used independently in the 1600s. Today, each word has a specific meaning under maritime law, to describe two types of marine debris.

Flotsam is defined as debris in the water that was not deliberately thrown overboard. This is usually a result of a shipwreck or accident and includes portions of the ship itself, as well as cargo or other items that float to the surface after a ship sinks. The word flotsam derives from the French word *floter*, to float.

Jetsam describes debris deliberately thrown overboard by a crew of a ship in distress, most often to lighten the ship’s load. Jetsam is a shortened form of jettison. The term can be used to describe anything that gets tossed off the ship in this fashion and is discovered floating in the water or washed ashore.

Under maritime law the distinction is important. Flotsam may be claimed by the original owner, whereas jetsam may be claimed as property of whoever discovers it. If the jetsam is valuable, the discoverer can sell it and keep the proceeds.

These words are related to salvage, property that has been recovered from a wreckage, or the recovery of the ship itself.

The law of salvage originated in the Roman practice of *negotiorum gestio*, which dictated that one who preserved or improved upon the property of another was owed compensation from the owner, even if he had not asked for the service. The laws have evolved since *negotiorum gestio*, and today, in the US, a salvor who voluntarily brings the goods back into port may legally lay claim to them or deliver them to a marshal in return for a reward.

I think that flotsam and jetsam can be pretty much defined by the old rhyme:

Finders keepers,
Losers weepers.

FLUMMERY

“Flummery” is another word for baloney, but also means a food made from oat husks steeped in water, called in Scotland *sowens*, which developed into a sweet dessert popular in the British Isles.

The name is derived from a Welsh word for a similar dish made from sour oatmeal and husks, *llymru*. “Flummery” later came to have connotations of a bland, unsatisfying food, and thereby developed the meaning of empty compliments, unsubstantial talk or writing, and nonsense.

The name is first seen in Gervase Markham’s 1623 *Country Contentments, or English Huswife*: “From this small Oat-meale, by oft steeping it in water and clensing it, and then boyling it to a thicke and stiffe jelly, is made that excellent dish of meat which is so esteemed in the West parts of this Kingdome, which they call Wash-brew, and in Chesheire and Lankasheire they call it Flamerie or Flumerie.”

“Flummery” is also the name that has been given to more modern mousse desserts or to blancmange, or for foods that incorporate jelly and tinned cream.

You’ll find many recipes for flummery on the Web. One is for Raspberry Flummery, made with fresh raspberries, sugar, and cornstarch cooked together, then topped with freshly whipped cream, a perfect combination of tart and sweet.

A number of 1700s cookery books have recipes for flummery eggs and bacon. In one version, the eggs and bacon are sitting on a bed of green jelly meant to represent chopped spinach. Now, spinach is a food that can be banned forever, as far as I’m concerned, and green jelly is not far behind. Gimme my eggs and bacon straight, please!

FLY-BY-NIGHT

A dishonest person who departs or flees at night to avoid creditors, police, and so on. A fly-by-night company is a dishonest one that may appear and disappear rapidly.

According to Grose's *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1796), "fly-by-night" was originally an ancient term used about an old woman, signifying she is a witch. Later, at the beginning of the 1800s, the term referred to anyone who departed hastily from a recent activity, especially while owing money. The disappearance was usually at night, and the person was usually a swindler. Or the person fleeing might have been a deadbeat tenant vacating his lodgings in the middle of the night to avoid the wrath of his landlord or other creditors.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "fly-by-night" was also used in England in the 1800s as a term for a type of light, usually two-wheeled, carriage. The "fly" (as they were more commonly known) was originally drawn or pushed by a man, later replaced by a horse.

FORTUNE COOKIE

This crisp cookie is usually made from flour, sugar, vanilla, and sesame seed oil and has a piece of paper inside, a "fortune," on which is printed an aphorism or a prophecy. The message may also have a Chinese phrase with a translation and/or a list of lucky numbers to use for lotteries. However, fortune cookies are not a tradition in China.

The exact origin of fortune cookies is unclear, though they most likely originated with Japanese immigrants to the US in the late 1800s or early 1900s.

In the 1800s, a cookie very like the modern fortune cookie was made in Kyoto, Japan; there is a Japanese temple tradition of random fortunes, *omikujī*. The Japanese version of the cookie is a bit larger, made of darker dough, and contains sesame and miso rather than vanilla and butter.

The cookie is easy to trace from World War II. At that time, they were a regional specialty, served in California Chinese restaurants, and known as "fortune tea cakes." They were discovered by soldiers and sailors on their way back from the Pacific. When these veterans returned home, they would ask their local Chinese restaurants to serve fortune cookies and thus, the cookies rapidly spread across the country.

There are approximately 3 billion fortune cookies made each year around the world, most for consumption in the US. The largest manufacturer of cookies, in Brooklyn, New York, makes over 4.5 million fortune cookies per day. The crisp fortune cookies have spread around the world, but there is one place where fortune cookies are conspicuously absent: China.

There are multi-cultural versions of the fortune cookie. For instance, the "Mexican" version of the fortune cookie is called the "Lucky Taco." It's a red taco-shaped cookie with a fortune inside.

You can find lists of fortune cookie messages online. Here are a few of my favorites:

- Ignore previous cookie.
- Help! I'm being held prisoner in a Chinese bakery!
- I can't believe you're about to eat my tiny home.
- Plan to be spontaneous tomorrow.

FORTY WINKS

“Forty winks” is a nap. The implication is that you’re lying with eyes closed, the “extended wink” assumed during sleep, but that you don’t fall into a deep sleep. “Wink” has been associated with sleep since the 1300s.

The phrase “forty winks” can be traced back to Dr. Kitchiner’s 1821 self-help guide, *The Art of Invigorating and Prolonging Life*. In an 1821 issue of the *British Literary Chronicle* is a review of Kitchiner’s book, which says in part, “Sleep is a subject on which our author acknowledges his feelings are tremblingly alive; he is fond of a ‘forty-winks’ nap in an horizontal posture, as the best preparative for any extraordinary exertion, either of body or mind.”

But if you didn’t sleep a wink, you got almost no sleep at all. Yet catching 40 winks means having a brief nap. So where does the 40 come from?

How Did It Begin? by R. Brasch (1966) has a whole section on the number 40. “Once it was believed that there was magic in figures and the number 40 was thought to possess supernatural powers.” Cassell’s *Dictionary of Slang* gives ‘many’ as a slang definition of “forty” dating from the mid-1800s.

It seems to be accepted that forty winks is just exactly the right amount of sleep, whether it’s five minutes or forty minutes.

I love catching 40 winks. They’re so soft and delicious, just like chocolate.

FOUR FLUSHER

“Four flushing” means empty boasting or unsuccessful bluffing, but can also refer to a welsher, piker, or braggart. This pejorative term originated in the 1800s when bluffing poker players misrepresented that they had a flush—a poker hand with five cards all of one suit—when they only had four cards of one suit. Strategies for bluffing or folding when holding a four flush have been explored extensively in poker strategy books.

It is uncertain whether four flushing should be called cheating (dishonest) or bluffing (which is deception but not necessarily dishonest in poker). For example, the term “ace up one’s sleeve” is different from “ace in the hole.” Each of them represents a concealed advantage. But the first results from cheating, the second does not.

The Pocket Dictionary of American Slang (1960, 1967) has this definition for four flusher: One who bluffs; a pretender; especially one who pretends to have money while living off or borrowing from others; one who does not pay his debts.

The phrase has been used many times in entertainment and political theater.

My father taught me to play blackjack poker when I was about eleven or twelve, but he always won all my pennies, so obviously I never learned how to bluff.

FRESHET

A “freshet” is a large rising or overflowing of a stream caused by heavy rains or melted snow, often from a spring thaw. The term can also refer to a small stream of fresh water. The use of the word is first found in 1596.

A spring freshet can sometimes last several weeks on large river systems, both in Eastern and Western North America.

In the Fraser River Basin in British Columbia, the timing of freshets is critical. Migratory fish, such as salmon and trout, are highly responsive to freshets. In the low flows present at the end of freshets, fish are more likely to move upstream. During high flows at the peak of a freshet, fish are more likely to descend streams. The largest freshet ever experienced in the Fraser River occurred in 1894. The 1948 flood, the second largest known, caused extensive damage in the lower Fraser Valley.

The 1997 Red River Valley Flood was the result of an exceptionally large freshet fed by large snowpacks which melted in rapidly warming temperatures, inundating the frozen ground. At the peak of the flood, the Red River reached a depth of 54 feet. This event has been referred to, in the areas impacted, as “the flood of the century.”

In 1972, the Susquehanna River which flows into Chesapeake Bay experienced a considerably large freshet due to Tropical Storm Agnes, resulting in flooding and increased sedimentation in Chesapeake Bay.

The word “freshet” sounds to me like something small and gentle, but it obviously describes one of the most powerful forces of nature.

FRISBEE

A gliding toy usually made of plastic and roughly 8 to 10 inches in diameter. It is also used in competitions for throwing and catching, as in flying disc games.

The frisbee began life in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1871, with the *Frisbie Pie Company*. Students from nearby universities would throw the empty pie tins to each other, yelling “Frisbie!” as they let go.

It was not until 1948 that the partnership of Morrison and Franscioni invented a plastic version of the disc called the “Flying Saucer” that could fly further and be thrown more accurately than tin pie plates. Morrison made an improved model in 1955 and sold it to the toy company *Wham-O* as the “Pluto Platter” during the public craze over space and UFOs.

In 1957, *Wham-O* co-founders gave the disc the brand name “Frisbee” after learning that college students were calling the Pluto Platter by that term.

The Frisbee was inducted into the National Toy Hall of Fame in 1998.

Many games are played with the frisbee. In 1967, high school students in New Jersey, invented Ultimate Frisbee, a cross between football, soccer, and basketball. In addition, there is Freestyle Frisbee, with choreographed routines set to music and multiple discs in play.

The longest recorded disc throw was 1,109 feet. Disc dog sports use relatively slow-flying discs made of more pliable material to better resist a dog's bite and prevent injury to the dog. Also available are flying rings which typically travel significantly farther than any traditional flying disc. Illuminated discs contain chemiluminescent fluid, or battery-powered LEDs, and are made of phosphorescent plastic for play after dark. Others whistle when they reach a certain velocity in flight.

By very aggressively marketing Frisbee-playing as a new sport, *Wham-O* sold over 100 million units of its famous toy by 1977. The official Frisbee is now owned by *Mattel Toy Manufacturers*.

I am going to look at my tin foil pie plates with new awe and respect.

FUDDY-DUDDY

“Fuddy-duddy” is slang for a stuffy, fussy, or foolishly old-fashioned person. It is mildly derogatory but can be affectionate. Synonyms: frump, schoolmarm, old fart.

The word's origin is uncertain, but “fuddy-duddy” could be American, possibly via Scotland. The first record appears to be from the Texas newspaper *The Galveston Daily News*, 1889: “Look here; I'm Smith — Hamilton Smith. I'm a minister and I try to do about right; I object to being represented as an old fuddy-duddy.”

“Duddy” is a Scottish term meaning “ragged.” The word “duds” had been used to refer to rough tattered clothes since the 1400s. “Fud,” or “fuddy,” was a Scots dialect term for buttocks.

In 1833, the Scots poet James Ballantyne wrote *The Wee Raggit Laddie*:

“Wee stuffy, stumpy, dumpie laddie,
Thou urchin elfin, bare an' duddy,
Thy plumpit kite an' cheek sae ruddy,
Are fairly baggit,
Although the breekums on thy fuddy,
Are e'en right raggit.”

Scots dialect is difficult to translate precisely, but the gist is: “Poor scruffy little lad, bare and ragged, your wet belly and red cheeks are swollen and the trousers on your buttocks are torn.”

It seems certain that the cartoon character Elmer Fudd inherited his name from the phrase. “Fuddy-duddy” was in general use long before Elmer was created around 1940 and the expression fits his old-fashioned and obsessive temperament.

FULL MONTY

“The full monty” has two meanings:

- the full amount expected, desired, or possible
- a striptease performance involving full nudity, especially by a man

The phrase is British slang of uncertain origin. It means “everything which is necessary, appropriate or possible; the works.” Similar North American phrases include “the whole kit and caboodle,” “the whole nine yards,” and “[going] the whole hog.”

The phrase was first identified in print by lexicographers of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in the 1980s. Anecdotal evidence exists for earlier usage.

There are three theories about the origins of the phrase.

One is Field Marshal Montgomery’s alleged insistence that his troops eat a full English breakfast every day, and his alleged habit of wearing his full set of medals. It’s true that Montgomery was universally known as Monty, but that’s just circumstantial evidence.

The second is that it refers to a full three-piece suit with waistcoat and a spare pair of trousers from the Leeds-based British tailoring company Montague Burton. When British forces were demobilized after the Second World War, they were issued with a “demob suit.” The contract for supplying these suits was partly fulfilled by Montague Burton. There is plausible hearsay evidence from staff in Burton’s shops that customers were familiar with the term and often asked for “the full monty” by name. Also, the firm began business in 1904 and, by 1929, had more than 500 shops, thus the name Montague Burton would have been well-known.

The third theory is that it is gamblers’ jargon, meaning the entire pot, deriving from the card game called monte. But no supporting evidence exists for this one.

A friend saw the 1997 film *The Full Monty*, in which the phrase means total nudity. His amazement caused him to report that it contained “full nudal frontity.”

FUNNY BONE

The “funny bone” is that part of the elbow over which the ulnar nerve passes. A knock on the funny bone may cause numbness and pain along the forearm and hand.

“Funny bone” is also an idiom meaning a person’s sense of humor. When something tickles your funny bone, it makes you laugh or amuses you.

The phrase has been in use since the early 1800s.

As explained by James Mitchell in *Significant Etymology: Or, Roots, Stems, and Branches of the English Language* (1908):

“The funny bone, or, as Americans more frequently term it, the crazy-bone, is the term popularly applied to what anatomists call the inner condyle of the *L. humerus*...a blow on which

jars the ulnar nerve and produces a funny tingling sensation. A good dissecting-room joke for first-year's students is, Why is the funny-bone so-called? 'Because it borders on the humerus.'"

The related idiom "tickle one's funny bone," used from the early 1900s, derives from combining the indication of humor with the fact that one laughs when tickled.

Reba McEntire, actress and singer, said, "To succeed in life, you need three things: a wishbone, a backbone and a funny bone."

I couldn't agree more.

QUICK BITES

FIDDLE-FADDLE — Trivial matters, nonsense, candy-coated popcorn (1570s)

FINE FETTL — In good order or condition, healthy.

FINK — Nasty or contemptible person, strike-breaker, informer.

FIVE WILL GET YOU TEN — Likely; chances are good: from betting parlance.

FLABBERGAST — To surprise or greatly astonish someone. The British comedian Frankie Howard often used to say in mock astonishment, "I'm flabbergasted — never has my flabber been so gasted!" The origin is unknown. It was mentioned in 1772, in a magazine article that called it a new vogue word, of uncertain origin. It may have come from some dialect because, in 1823, "flabbergast" was noted as a Sussex word, perhaps combining flabby and aghast.

FLABBERGASTED — Appalled by discovering how much weight one has gained (from a contest in which readers are asked to supply alternate meanings for common words).

FLAPDOODLER — One who talks nonsense (often political).

FRESH — Slang for insolent, presumptuous, impudent, flirtatious, cheeky (1848).

FRIGORIFIC — Cold, chilly, 1667, from Latin *frigorificus*.



— G —

GARGOYLE

A decorative waterspout in the form of a grotesque human or animal. The oldest gargoyle-like creation is a 13,000-year-old stone crocodile discovered in Turkey.

In architecture, a gargoyle is made with a spout designed to carry water from the roof and away from the side of a building, thus preventing rainwater from running down masonry walls and eroding the mortar. A trough is cut in the back of the gargoyle and rainwater typically exits through the open mouth.

The term originates from the French *gargouille*, meaning in English “throat” or “gullet” and similar words (from the root *gar*, “to swallow”) which mimic the gurgling sound of water.

When only serving as an ornament, the correct term for such a sculpture is a grotesque, chimera, or boss. Just as with bosses and chimeras, gargoyles are said to protect what they guard from any evil or harmful spirits.

The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans all used animal-shaped waterspouts. During the 1100s, when gargoyles appeared in Europe, the Roman Catholic Church was converting many people. Most people were illiterate, so images were important to convey ideas. Many early gargoyles depicted dragons. In addition to serving as spouts for water, the gaping mouths of these ugly gargoyles evoked the fearsome destructiveness of these legendary beasts, reminding the laity of the need for the church’s protection. Ah, yes, the protection racket.

The earliest known medieval gargoyles appear on Laon Cathedral (c. 1200–1220). Some of the more famous are the gargoyles of Notre-Dame de Paris. Although most have grotesque features, the term gargoyle has come to include all types of images. Some were depicted as monks, or combinations of real animals and people. Sometimes gargoyles illustrated pagan beliefs to reflect the unique cultural history of the community around the cathedral.

Few buildings using gargoyles were constructed after the early 1700s. Some people found them frightening, and sometimes heavy ones fell off, causing damage. In 1724, the London Building Act made the use of downpipes compulsory in all new construction.

In the 1980s, the Washington National Cathedral held a contest for kids to design a new gargoyle. Thirteen-year-old Christopher Rader proposed Darth Vader and his design was one of the winners. It is now mounted on the cathedral’s “dark side” north wall, and Lord Vader is protecting the cathedral from who-knows-what.

GASLIGHTING

“Gaslighting” is an insidious technique of deception and psychological manipulation. Its effect is to gradually undermine the confidence of the victims in their ability to distinguish truth from

falsehood, right from wrong, or reality from appearance. It is a form of emotional abuse, often with the goal of achieving or maintaining control. There is often a power dynamic involved where the targets are vulnerable because they fear losses if they challenge the manipulator.

“Gaslighting” is derived from the play *Gas Light*, in which a manipulative and deceitful husband drives his wife nearly to insanity. It was adapted for the 1940 British film, and later 1944 American remake. The title of the play refers to gas lights in the couple’s home that the husband periodically dims. The wife repeatedly asks her husband to confirm her perceptions about the dimming lights and he insists that the lights have not changed. His intention is to have her committed to a mental institution.

The term first appeared in print in 1969.

Gaslighting in the workplace can include these ploys: The victim may be excluded, made the subject of gossip, persistently discredited, or questioned to destroy their confidence. The perpetrator may divert conversations to perceived faults or wrongs.

Psychologically abusive parents often put on a “good parent” face in public yet withhold love and care in private, leading children to question their own perceptions of reality and to wonder whether their parent is the good person everyone else sees or the much darker person that comes out when child and parent are alone. Manipulative parents may also play favorites and persuade the unloved child it’s all his or her fault for not being what the parent wants.

In his 2008 book *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind*, psychologist Bryant Welch described the prevalence of the technique in American politics beginning in the age of modern communications, stating: “Gaslighting comes directly from blending modern communications, marketing, and advertising techniques with long-standing methods of propaganda.”

Learning the facts is often difficult, but well worth the effort and, in some cases, essential.

GIBBERISH

Rapid and inarticulate speech, meaningless, incoherent, or unintelligible verbiage.

This disparaging term is often applied to language that is meaningless because of overuse of technical or legal terms, or to games and specialized jargon that seems nonsensical to outsiders. It is sometimes used as an insult to denigrate ideas or opinions the user disagrees with or finds to be nonsense or claptrap.

The etymology of gibberish is uncertain. The term was first seen in English in the early 1500s. It may originate from the word “jib,” which is the Anglo-Romany word meaning “language” or “tongue.” To non-speakers, the Anglo-Romany dialect might sound like English mixed with nonsense words, and if those nonsense words are referred to as “jib,” that could have evolved into the term gibberish.

We can excuse small children for their gibberish, for they sometimes love to simply make sounds. Older children like to make up languages, such as pig Latin, so that “out” groups, especially adults, don’t understand what they’re saying.

My favorite gibberish is Lewis Carroll’s poem, *Jabberwocky*:

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

It’s just enough like English, especially with the clever use of English words and grammar, that I always feel like I *almost* understand it.

GIMMICK

A “gimmick” is a novel device or idea designed primarily to attract attention or increase appeal, but often has little intrinsic value. When applied to retail marketing, it is a unique or quirky feature designed to make a product or service stand out from its competitors.

Though we don’t know where “gimmick” came from, etymologists guess it emerged in the US in the early 1900s. It first appeared in American newspapers in the 1910s and 1920s.

The Oxford Dictionary suggests that it may have originated as a slang term for something that a con artist or magician used to make appearances different from reality, and then came to mean any piece of magicians’ apparatus. Another possible origin is a use at gaming tables, meaning “a device used for making a fair game crooked.”

Some gimmicks are easy and attractive. For example, toothbrushes are often given certain gimmicks, such as bright colors, easy-grip handles, or color-changing bristles so they appear more interesting to consumers, especially children. Musicians often adopt visual gimmicks that do not affect their music, such as dyed hair, odd clothes, and so on. A useful gimmick is novel packaging, such as a jam or coffee jar that can be reused as a drinking mug or storage container.

Some gimmicks break the company that introduced them. In 1992, the British division of The Hoover Company launched a promotional campaign which promised free airline tickets to purchasers of its appliances. The division lost £50 million as a result.

The Hoover Company obviously needed to have an accountant as part of its advertising staff.

GIVE NO QUARTER

In war, when a victor shows no mercy and refuses to spare the life of a vanquished opponent in return for unconditional surrender, he is said to “give no quarter” (take no prisoners). Effectively, it’s a death sentence.

Before the 1300s, “quarter” meant the fourth part of something or the points of the compass.

Eventually, the meaning expanded to an area of a city, particularly one occupied by a specific group, for example, “the Chinese quarter.” The same meaning was applied to a section of an army camp.

By the beginning of the 1300s, “quarter” began to be used to describe a region or local area. By 1591, “quarters” became the common military term for a residence. A few short years later, written records used “quarter” as a verb meaning “to provide lodging for soldiers.” Not until 1611 was the phrase “to give no quarter” first recorded.

To house and feed a prisoner meant giving them quarters, so to refuse to quarter men who surrendered meant they would be put to death. Sometimes a red flag was raised to signal the intent to give no quarter. No reason is given for the color, but perhaps it was used because red is the color of blood. With the Hague Convention of 1907, it became illegal to grant no quarter. Eventually, “give no quarter” took on a figurative meaning of showing no mercy, usually applied in negotiation situations.

The idiom “to keep good quarters with” meant to have good relations with a person or persons. Shakespeare used it in *The Comedy of Errors* in 1590.

I give no quarter to invading mice. Despite the Hague Convention, my cat concurs.

GOBBLEDEGOOK

“Gobbledegook” was coined in the 1940s in the US. It means the pompous talk of officialdom, long, vague, involved, and usually with Latinized words. Synonyms are: jargon, pretentious verbiage, nonsense, and bafflegab. For a change, we know exactly where it came from!

The word was coined by US Representative Maury Maverick (grandson of Sam Maverick, whose refusal to brand his cows gave us “maverick,” which means “independent”). Maury Maverick, a Texan lawyer who was at various times a Democratic Congressman and the mayor of San Antonio, oversaw factory production during WWII, and described the double-talk and jargon he was encountering from government officials as “gobbledygook.” The word was an instant hit. His inspiration, he said, was the turkey, “always gobbledy gobbling and strutting with ludicrous pomposity.” And, in one inspired moment, he gave us the perfect word for the sound a bureaucracy makes.

Maverick first used the word in a memo dated March 30, 1944, banning the “gobbledygook language” and mock-threatening, “anyone using the words ‘activation’ or ‘implementation’ will be shot.”

Michael Shanks, former chairman to the National Consumer Council of Great Britain, characterizes professional gobbledygook as sloppy jargon intended to confuse nonspecialists: “‘Gobbledygook’ may indicate a failure to think clearly, a contempt for one’s clients, or more probably a mixture of both. A system that can’t or won’t communicate is not a safe basis for a democracy.”

Stephen Pinker used it brilliantly: “Academics in the softer fields dress up the trivial and obvious with the trappings of scientific sophistication, hoping to bamboozle their audiences with highfalutin gobbledygook.”

GOBSMACKED

Flabbergasted, astounded, or speechless. In other words, your emotion is much stronger than mere surprise.

“Gobsmacked” is a combination of the northern English and Scottish slang term “gob,” mouth, with the verb “smack.” An example is: “I was utterly gobsmacked to hear that a 22-year-old woman from America has put her virginity up for sale.”

Gob has been a slang term for the mouth for four hundred years, used, for example, in phrases like “shut your gob!” to tell somebody to be quiet. It may go back to a Scottish Gaelic word meaning a beak or a mouth. “Gab” is another form of the word, which gives us “gift of the gab.” Then there’s “gobstopper,” a round, hard candy which stops one’s gob from talking.

The word first appeared in print in *A Woman of Bangkok*, by Jack Reynolds, 1959, and became popular in the 1980s.

GOING NINETEEN TO THE DOZEN

Going at breakneck speed.

Apparently, the phrase arose during the heyday of the Cornish tin and copper mines, which were often hit by floods. In the 1700s, coal-powered, steam-driven pumps were installed to clear the water. When working at the top rates, the pumps could clear nineteen thousand gallons of water for every twelve bushels of coal burned.

A modern example of its use comes from the *Daily Mail* of October 23, 2003: “Talking nineteen to the dozen, her conversation is still peppered with outrageous references and bawdy asides.” The picture we get is that the rate of talking is so great that when other people say merely a dozen words, the speaker gets in nineteen.

GOLDBRICK

As a noun, a “goldbrick” is a worthless brick that appears to be of gold. As a verb, “goldbrick” means a person who shirks assigned work.

The original “gold brick” was of pure gold metal, melted and molded into brick form for convenience in handling. But, around the mid-1800s, some Western promoters of mining properties began to create lead bricks of the same size and coated them with gold. Rich, gullible Easterners were persuaded to invest in mines from which these “gold bricks” were alleged to have been produced. Eventually this term became synonymous with a swindle, and with faking.

By World War I, the term goldbrick was used in the military, to mean shirking work or responsibility, often by feigning illness. An expert feigned the appearance of working.

Instances of goldbricking increased markedly when broadband Internet connections became commonplace in workplaces. Before that, the slow speed of dial-up connections meant that spending work time browsing on the internet was rarely worthwhile. Many firms employ surveillance software to track their employees' Internet activity to improve productivity.

Getting caught playing online games at work would, I think, be slightly less embarrassing than being found asleep on the keyboard.

GOLLIWOG

A "golliwog" is a black doll character created by Florence Kate Upton for children's books in the late 1800s and usually depicted as a type of rag doll.

It was reproduced as a children's toy, which was very popular in the UK and Australia up until the 1970s. The doll had black skin, eyes rimmed in white, clown lips and frizzy hair, a product of the blackface minstrel tradition, white men who blacked up to perform songs in a manner that was itself a caricature.

The golliwog also appeared in the form of children's literature, dolls, children's china and other toys, ladies' perfume, and jewelry. *Golliwogg's Cakewalk* is the sixth and final piece in the *Children's Corner*, a suite for piano published by Claude Debussy in 1908.

The image of the doll is now controversial. While some people see the doll as an innocent toy, its depiction of African people is characterized as racist, along with pickaninnies, minstrels, mammy figures, and other such caricatures. In recent years, changing political attitudes about race have reduced the popularity and sales of golliwogs as toys.

Art historian Sir Kenneth Clark said that the golliwogs he knew in his childhood were "examples of chivalry, far more persuasive than the unconvincing Knights of the Arthurian legend." Alan Moore said that the Upton's original Golliwog "was a dignified and respectable figure. His courage and strength of character were demonstrated in his picaresque adventures, as was his intellectual acumen."

As Humpty Dumpty said, "A word means what I want it to mean."

GONE FOR A BURTON

"Gone for a burton" is a British expression meaning that a person is dead, or that some item is broken. "My washing machine has gone for a burton."

The phrase dates to mid-1900s Britain and the first reference in print is the definition in *The New Statesman*, August 1941: "Go for a Burton, crash." No one is sure how it originated.

This definition referred to aircraft having to ditch in the sea, ending up in the drink, so the idiom was black humor implying the pilot had gone in search of a beer. At the time, the Midlands town of Burton-upon-Trent was (and still is) famous for its breweries. RAF pilots who crashed, especially those who crashed into the sea, were said to have “gone for a Burton.”

One theory as to its origin suggests a pre-WWII ad for Burton’s Ale, in which a place at table was vacant and the missing person was said to have “gone for a Burton,” that is, gone to the pub for a drink. That would be a very strong candidate, but no record of the ad has been found.

A second theory refers to the suits made by Montague Burton, who supplied most of the demobilization suits that British servicemen were given on leaving service after WWII. Any serviceman who was absent could be said to have “gone for a burton,” meaning a suit. But this suggestion doesn’t quite match the meaning of the phrase.

RAF aircrew regarded it as bad luck to say that a man had died or was missing in action and, instead, they used the phrase “gone for a burton.” This is a plausible origin. But what inspired the RAF to think of such a phrase? Did it arise from the brewery ad, if it existed, or from the tailor Montague Burton? Or some third possibility?

In the *Aeronautical Review* of March 1942, the phrase is said to mean “Killed in action.” In that same month, the journal *Canadian Aviation* gave a similar definition. Several other journals reported the idiom the same year.

If you’re going to end up in the drink, a beer is probably a good choice.

GOODY TWO-SHOES

Someone who is virtuous in a coy, smug, or sentimental manner. The phrase was made popular by the 1765 publication of *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes*, a popular children’s story.

The plot, a variation of the Cinderella story, tells how Margery Meanwell, whose father was ruined by villains called Graspall and Gripe, has only one shoe to her name. When a rich gentleman gives her a complete pair, she’s so happy that she runs around exclaiming, “Two shoes, ma’am, two shoes!” to everyone she meets. Later she marries a rich widower, proving that her virtuousness has been rewarded.

You can tell by the characters’ names who is evil and who is good before you even get into the story. But this kind of tale, with revoltingly virtuous heroes and heroines, was in keeping with the 18th and 19th century taste in kids’ books and became a huge bestseller.

The actual origin of the phrase is unknown. However, the term “goody” is a corruption of “goodwife,” meaning “Mrs.” The male equivalent was “goodman.” That usage goes back to at least the 1550s, and it’s most likely how people would have thought of the term when *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* was published.

By the 1870s, the phrase “goody goody” meant someone characterized by good or pious

sentiment. “Goody goody gumdrops” appeared in the 1900s.

It was only in the 1930s that the expression “goody two shoes” came to mean, not the heroine of the story, but a person who was smugly virtuous, a goody-goody.

GOOFY WORDS

They’re fun simply because they are silly and fun to say. Here are a few that don’t seem to have any history and for which I could find no sources.

Caterwauling — a shrill howling like that of a cat

Fiddle-de-dee — exclamation of disbelief or disagreement

Fiddle-faddle —nonsense, candy-coated popcorn (1570s)

Foofaraw — excessive ornamentation; fuss over a trifle

Kerflooy — ceased functioning, fell apart, failed

Kerplop — sound of something falling

Picklepuss — someone habitually sullen or gloomy

Piffle — nonsense, an alteration of “trifle” (1890)

Skew-whiff — not straight, askew, lopsided

Wishy-washy — feeble, poor quality, vacillating, (1690s)

GO OVER LIKE A LEAD BALLOON

To fail completely and be recognized as a flop.

The phrase originated in the US. The first mention is in 1924 and comes from a *Mom-N-Pop* cartoon that was syndicated in several US newspapers. It didn’t appear again until after WWII.

The most famous use of the term was in the naming of the English heavy-metal band, Led Zeppelin. According to one anecdote, Keith Moon said that a band called the New Yardbirds (an impromptu band formed from the popular but rapidly disintegrating Yardbirds) would go down like a lead balloon, or zeppelin. The irony and the association with the heavy metal, lead, was too good to miss for an aspiring heavy-metal band.

The choice of Zeppelin in the band’s name was surely influenced by the Hindenburg disaster in 1937. The newsreel of the event was often seen in English cinemas during the 1950s and 60s and the band members would certainly have been familiar with it. The band used an image of the crash for the cover of their first album.

GRAFFITI

“Graffiti” (both singular and plural) means writings or drawings on a wall or other surface, usually without permission and in public view. Graffiti has existed since ancient Egypt and Greece. Graffiti often is regarded as part of a subculture that rebels against authority.

“Graffiti” is from the Italian word *graffiato*, meaning “scratched.” Art history describes it as works of art produced by scratching a design into a surface. In ancient times graffiti were carved

on walls with a sharp object, or chalk, or coal. Today, spray paint and marker pens are commonly used.

In most countries, marking property without permission is considered vandalism, a punishable crime. It is seen as a growing urban “problem” for many cities. But graffiti artists continue to display their art or political views in public locations.

Territorial graffiti marks urban neighborhoods with tags and logos to differentiate groups from each other. These images show whose turf is whose. Gang members use graffiti to designate membership throughout the gang.

Ancient graffiti displayed political rhetoric and love declarations, as well as simple messages, whereas today’s popular subjects are social and political ideals. An example of graffiti surviving in the ancient Greek city of Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) is apparently an advertisement for prostitution.

People visiting the citadel at Sigiriya in Sri Lanka scribbled over 1800 individual graffiti there between the 6th and 18th centuries. Etched on the Mirror Wall, they contain prose, poetry, and commentary. Most of these visitors appear to have been the elite of society, but some were soldiers, archers, and metalworkers.

Guatemala has examples of ancient Maya graffiti. Viking graffiti survive in Rome and at Newgrange Mound in Ireland, and a Varangian scratched his name (Halvdan) in runes on a stair banister in the Hagia Sophia at Constantinople. Such early graffiti have contributed to the understanding of lifestyles and languages of past cultures.

The oldest known example of modern graffiti are the “monikers” created by hobos and rail workers on train cars since the late 1800s. During World War II and after, the phrase “Kilroy was here,” with an accompanying drawing, was seen throughout the world, due to its use by American troops and ultimately filtering into American popular culture.

With the popularity and legitimization of graffiti has come a level of commercialization. In 2001, computer giant IBM launched an advertising campaign in Chicago and San Francisco which involved people spray painting on sidewalks.

Banksy is one of the world’s most notorious and popular street artists who continues to remain faceless. He is known for his political, anti-war stencil art mainly in Bristol, England. Banksy’s art is a prime example of the classic controversy: vandalism versus art. Art supporters endorse his work distributed in urban areas as pieces of art and some councils, such as Bristol and Islington, have officially protected them, while officials of other areas have deemed his work to be vandalism and have removed it.

A tattoo could be regarded as a legitimate form of graffiti. I wonder what message you send if you have a rose tattooed on your ankle.

GRAVEYARD SHIFT

A late-night/early-morning work shift.

This work shift was so-named not because it has anything to do with graveyards, but because of the spooky feeling of working in the dark silence of the midnight and early morning hours when most people are home asleep.

The similar phrase “graveyard watch” originated at about the same time, in the late 1800s, and refers to a shipboard watch from midnight to 4 a.m. The link was explained in this definition, from the American mariner Gershom Bradford, in *A Glossary of Sea Terms*, 1927: “Graveyard watch, the middle watch or 12 to 4 a.m., because of the number of disasters that occur at this time.”

GRAVY TRAIN

If you’re riding the “gravy train,” you’re enjoying ease, success, or profit, particularly if it’s undeserved and somebody else is paying for it.

Gravy is a delicious, rich, fattening food, and the word is frequently used to describe luxuries. It can also mean obtaining a windfall, such as an inheritance or a lottery prize. Related idioms are “meal ticket,” “easy street,” and “easy money.”

The *Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins* by Robert Hendrickson says that in the 1920s, railroad men used the expression “ride the gravy train” to describe a run on which there was good pay and very little work. But etymologists say there’s no evidence to support it arising from railroad lingo — none of the known appearances of “gravy train” refers to a literal train.

However, “gravy” has long been used as slang for something easy or cushy, simple to do, or an unexpected benefit. This is recorded in the major reference books as appearing slightly earlier (1910) than “gravy train,” which didn’t show up until 1914.

Another theory is that the phrase originated among vagabonds who hopped trains as a way of life and for whom “gravy train” would be a likely metaphor for an easy existence. That is, if you can believe that the hobo life was “an easy existence.”

GREEN-EYED MONSTER

Jealousy or jealousy personified.

Shakespeare may have coined the phrase, for he used it in *The Merchant of Venice*, in 1596.

The phrase could have arisen from the idea that when people are sick, their skin turns a yellow or greenish color. Also, unripe fruit (which will make you sick when you eat it) is green in color. And, of course, jealousy is a sickness.

Perhaps that’s why the emotion is pictured as a monster. It certainly feels like a monster when it

has its claws in you. And, because it's so universal in human nature, it has caused much brutality, including murder. It's a common theme in fiction.

Jealousy is not the same as envy. It's childish anger because you can't have exclusive possession of some thing or some person. Both emotions can cause much pain and grief.

I'd like to know what the green-eyed monster looks like. Is it a huge dragon with long, long claws and many teeth, belching flame? Or is it my green-eyed cat, pawing at my arm because she doesn't want me to pet that horrid dog?

GREENHORN

Anyone who is inexperienced, immature, or gullible. In other words, a rookie.

The word is often attributed to cowboys of the Old West, who noticed the horns on young cattle had a greenish tint. But it appears that the word is much older.

Another possible origin goes back to the 1600s and 1700s and jewelry manufacturing. Some items were made from horn and set into silver frames. The horn was usually decorated with a figure, often a head, which was impressed in the brown horn by heating the horn to a specific temperature and shaping it over a mold. Too high a temperature would result in the horn ending up green rather than the original, desirable brown. Such an outcome was often produced by apprentices, and thus they came to be called greenhorns.

According to another source, "greenhorn" first appeared in the 1400s, meaning a young ox with new, or green horns. By about 1650, "greenhorn" was being applied to newly enlisted army recruits, and shortly thereafter came to mean any inexperienced person.

Since many of us can easily be scammed because we are naive, "greenhorn" can also sometimes mean "sucker" or "simpleton."

GREEN THUMB

Someone adept at growing plants.

"Green fingers" first appeared in the 1930s, followed ten years later by "green thumb." As to how one's thumb or fingers get green, there are several theories.

It may come from the fact that algae growing on the outside of earthenware pots will stain a person's thumb if he or she handles enough pots. Hence, a person who is always working with flowerpots may literally have a green thumb.

Another theory is that it originated during the reign of King Edward I of England. He was fond of green peas and kept half a dozen serfs shelling them during the season. The serf who had the greenest thumb won a prize. Being speedy at shelling probably also kept him from eating too many of those scrumptious little morsels.

The eminent etymologist Eric Partridge suggested that “green thumb” referred to the very old English proverb, “An honest miller has a golden thumb.” Millers, who grind corn for farmers, used to judge the quality of their corn flour by rubbing a bit between the palm and thumb. However, millers were often suspected of cheating their customers, and “golden thumb” was often sarcastic, to mean a talent for duplicity. The proverb was well enough known in Britain in the mid-1900s to make the “golden thumb” and “green thumb” connection plausible.

The first Oxford citation for “green-thumbed” is from the June 6, 1937, *Washington Post*: “He is, I think, the ‘green-thumbed’ type of gardener, who has lived and loved his flowers and has learned from them and from the soil.”

Now, I happen to have a black thumb. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “black thumb” as a notable inability to make plants grow; a tendency to fail as a gardener. Much as I regret it, that’s me.

QUICK BITES

GALLIVANT — Since 1809, the word means to travel, roam, or move about for pleasure, or to go about indiscreetly with members of the opposite sex. The word may have come from “gallant,” meaning a dashing man of fashion, a fine gentleman, or one who pays much attention to women.

GALUMPHING — Prancing about in a triumphant manner. Lewis Carroll coined the word for *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) in “Jabberwocky,” perhaps by blending gallop and triumph.

GIZMO — A gadget whose real name is unknown or forgotten.

GO BANANAS — To become very excited or angry (1960s). The close association of apes and monkeys with bananas in the Western imagination probably gave rise to the term.

GO DOOLALLY — To become insane. The phrase originated as military slang referring to “Deolali,” an Indian town where a military sanatorium was located. (1925)

GOOFY — Goofy means being crazy, ridiculous, silly, or harmlessly eccentric. Or, in surfing and other board sports, having the right leg in front of the left on the board. Finally, it can mean an animated character that first appeared in 1932’s Mickey’s Revue. Named for clumsiness and ineptitude, he is an anthropomorphic dog characterized as a hick with a southern drawl.

GOOGOL — The digit 1 followed by 100 zeroes. The term was coined by 9-year-old Milton Sirota, nephew of mathematician Edward Kasner. Kasner popularized the concept in his 1940 book *Mathematics and the Imagination*. It is useful when comparing with other very large quantities such as the number of subatomic particles in the visible universe or the number of hypothetical possibilities in a chess game. The name “Google” is an accidental misspelling of “googol” by the company’s founders, to signify that the search engine was intended to provide large quantities of information.

GREASE A PALM — To pay a bribe or make an illegal payment in return for special favors and/or influence. “If we want to get our products into Mexico, we’ll have to grease a few palms.” The word “grease” is used in the sense of “enrich.” The phrase originated in Britain in the 1500s and has been in use since it was first coined. It arose from the expression “grease the wheels” since wheels required grease to turn smoothly without squeaking. Or squealing.

GUFF — Trivial, worthless, or insolent talk or ideas, nonsense. The word was once used in English and Scots to mean a puff or a whiff of bad smell. A Canadianism I’m familiar with is “no guff,” which is (1) a declaration of truthfulness or (2) an expression of mock surprise at a statement.



— H —

HALLOWE'EN

Halloween or Hallowe'en (a contraction of Hallows' Evening) is a celebration observed in several countries on 31 October, the time in the Christian year dedicated to remembering the dead, including saints (hallows). The word itself dates to about 1745.

It is believed that many Halloween traditions originated from ancient Celtic harvest festivals, particularly the Gaelic festival Samhain; that such festivals may have had pagan roots; and that Samhain itself was Christianized as Halloween by the early Church.

Secular Halloween activities include trick-or-treating, costume parties, carving pumpkins into jack-o'-lanterns, lighting bonfires, apple bobbing, divination games, playing pranks, visiting haunted attractions, telling scary stories, and watching horror films. In some parts of the world, it is a Christian religious observance.

On the night of October 31, Celts celebrated Samhain and people would light bonfires and wear costumes to ward off ghosts, believing that on this night, the ghosts of the dead returned to earth. The day also marked the end of summer and the harvest, and the start of the dark, cold winter, a time of year often associated with human death.

To commemorate the event, Druids built huge sacred bonfires, where the people gathered to burn crops and animals as sacrifices to the Celtic deities. During the celebration, the Celts wore costumes, typically consisting of animal heads and skins, and attempted to tell each other's fortunes. When the celebration was over, they re-lit their hearth fires (extinguished earlier that evening) from the sacred bonfire to help protect them during the coming winter.

In the late 1800s, there was a move in America to mold Halloween into a holiday more about neighborly get-togethers than about ghosts, pranks, and witchcraft. At the turn of the century, Halloween parties for both children and adults became a common way to celebrate the day. Parties focused on games, foods of the season and festive costumes.

Thus, a new American tradition was born, and it has continued to grow. Today, Americans spend an estimated \$6 billion annually on Halloween, making it the country's second largest commercial holiday after Christmas.

Begging for offerings from a household, originally known as souling or mumming, dates to the Middle Ages and is considered to be the precursor of the modern practice of trick-or-treating. Beginning around the 1400s, the poor would offer to sing prayers for the souls of a household's dead in exchange for soul cakes — a form of alms for the dead. As Halloween grew more secular, this practice was adopted by children. Instead of saying prayers, they would sing songs, recite poems, or perform other entertaining tricks in exchange for nuts, fruit, or coins. The habit of dressing children in disguise for souling became common during the 1800s.

“Jack-o’-lantern” is derived from the myth of Stingy Jack, believed to have originated in the 1600s. Stingy Jack was a drunkard and cheat who was refused entry into heaven (because he was a miser) and hell (because he played tricks on the devil). He was thus condemned to wander the dimension between the living and the dead until Judgement Day with only an ember from hell to light his way. He kept the ember in a carved-out turnip as a lantern and thus was known as Jack of the lantern, or Jack-o’-Lantern.

In Ireland and Britain, the original jack-o’-lanterns were hollowed-out turnips, beets, or potatoes, carved to show a demonic face and lit from the inside by a candle. These vegetables were placed in the window or on the doorstep to frighten away Stingy Jack and other evil spirits.

Pumpkins are much more popular in North America. They’re bigger and scarier and, besides, they also give you pumpkin pie. With whipped cream, which is really scary.

HAND

The word “hand” is used in many ways in the language, just as we use our hands, those useful body tools, in many ways. Following are some phrases and proverbs.

All hands on deck — traditional nautical command for all sailors to report for duty (1700s)
Bite the hand that feeds you — hurt someone who has been kind to you
The devil makes work for idle hands — people without enough work will do bad things
A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush — don’t risk losing what you have by seeking more
Get your hands dirty — do physical work; do something dishonest
Firsthand — seen or experienced for yourself
Secondhand — information reported by someone else, or used goods
Force someone’s hand — compel to act against his or her will
Give a hand — help; applaud
Caught red-handed — discovered doing something wrong
On the one hand — introduces the first of two contrasting points
On the other hand — introduces the second of two contrasting points
Have a hand in — be involved with, have influence on
Get your hands on — obtain
Free hand — unrestricted freedom to action
Freehand — done without mechanical aids or devices
Dab hand — expert at a particular activity (1600s)
Underhanded — done in secret or dishonestly; sneaky
Upper hand — power, control, dominance
In hand — under control; in reserve
At hand — nearby; imminent
On hand — immediately available; close by
Take in hand — to take control of or to lead
Get out of hand — to become chaotic and unmanageable
Hands-on — learn by doing rather than studying theory
Hands off! — don’t touch!
Hands up! — surrender!

Hands down — without a doubt
Hand over — give or yield something
Before hand — ahead of time
Handmade — made by hand, not machine, and assumed to be superior
Handwork — work done with the hands
Handiwork — work (often creative) done by the hands
Ham-handed — clumsy, inept
Backhanded — meaning the opposite of what it seems to mean; sarcastic
Have to hand it to you — recognize your achievement
Hand — the cards held in a game such as bridge or poker
Sleight of hand — a cleverly executed trick or deception
Hand in glove — working very closely with someone
Lend a hand — help
Handsome — in the 1400s, this word meant “easy to handle”
Come in handy — be useful in a particular situation
Handy — close at hand, convenient, a person who can fix anything
Handy-dandy — convenient and useful; an old children’s game
Wash one’s hands of — disclaim responsibility for
Show of hands — indicating a vote pro or con something
Handsy — touching other people, often inappropriately
Hand in hand — in close association (crackers & cheese)

And, finally, I raise my tired hand in farewell!

HAT TRICK

A hat trick is making a goal three times in a sport or other game, such as car racing, marbles, poker, and scrabble. To score a hat trick of hat tricks would be to score three goals in each of three consecutive games.

The term may have been adopted from the image of a conjurer pulling objects from his hat (mentioned in *Punch* magazine in 1858). The trick is done by using a top hat with a false lid or by sleight of hand. It became popular in Victorian England and the term appears many times in newspapers throughout the rest of the 1800s.

In ice hockey, a hat trick culminates with fans throwing hats onto the ice. The tradition is reported to have begun among fans in the National Hockey League around the 1950s.

The *Winnipeg Free Press* of 29 November 1944 reports that “hockey’s traditional ‘hat-trick’ — the feat of scoring three goals in a single game — will receive the official recognition from the Amateur Hockey Association of the US by awarding a small silver derby hat to players to mark the accomplishment.” So, by 1944, “hat trick” was common enough to be termed “traditional.”

Wayne Gretzky holds the NHL record for the most (50) hat tricks in a career. Harry Hyland scored the league’s first hat trick, in the league’s very first game on December 19th, 1917, in which Hyland’s Montreal Wanderers defeated the Toronto Arenas 10–9.

A Gordie Howe hat trick is a tongue-in-cheek play on the feat. It is achieved by scoring a goal, getting an assist, and getting in a fight, all in the same game. Namesake Gordie Howe himself only recorded two in his NHL career, as opposed to league leader Rick Tocchet, who accrued 18 Gordie Howe hat tricks.

HEAD GAMES

“Head games” always involve conscious one-upmanship, or psychological manipulation, used to confuse and deceive people. Such mind games, used in the struggle for prestige, appear in everyday life in every field.

In intimate relationships, mind games can be used to undermine one partner’s belief in the validity of their own perceptions, also known as gaslighting. The games may extend to denial of the victim’s reality, social under-mining, and downplaying the importance of the other partner’s perceptions. These are ploys often well-used by narcissists of both sexes.

According to one transactional analyst, “Games are so predominant and deep-rooted in society that they become institutionalized, that is, played according to rules that everybody knows about and more or less agrees to. “Alcoholic” is a game so popular that social institutions have developed to bring the various players together, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-anon.”

Psychological games vary widely in results, ranging from first-degree games where losing involves embarrassment or frustration, to third-degree games where consequences are life threatening. Eric Berne said that “games all have some element of exploitation,” and the therapeutic ideal he offered was to stop playing games altogether.

HEAD IN THE SAND

Refusing to acknowledge a problem; ignoring unwanted events hoping that they will go away.

This phrase arises from the myth that ostriches hide their heads in the sand when faced with attack by predators. The idea was apparently first recorded by the Roman writer, Pliny the Elder, who suggested that ostriches hide their heads in bushes. Perhaps, for ostrichkind, it’s but one small step from bush to sand.

Pliny’s story relies on the supposed stupidity of ostriches, and of birds in general. The notion is that the dumb ostrich believes that if it can’t see its attacker, then the attacker doesn’t exist. Douglas Adams exaggerated this idea in *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, in which the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal was described as “so mind-bogglingly stupid that it assumes that if you can’t see it, then it can’t see you.”

In fact, birds have a significantly larger brain to weight ratio than many other species of animal. And ostriches are so weighty that they could probably vanquish most predators by merely stomping on them.

HIGGLEDY-PIGGLEDY

Confusion or disorder. Synonyms: untidy, disorganized, messy, chaotic, jumbled, muddled, irregular, cluttered.

The phrase is an example of reduplication, the partial repetition of a word, often a nonsense word, for verbal effect. Similar words that refer to chaos and disorder are: helter-skelter and harum-scarum. They often may also be called ricochet words. “Higgledy-piggledy” first appeared in print in John Florio’s English/Italian dictionary, *A Worlde of Wordes*, 1598.

Most reduplicated terms involve the rhyming of two-syllable words such as hanky-panky or namby-pamby. Higgledy-piggledy is unusual in that it uses three-syllable words.

Why pigs? Well, if anything epitomizes ‘higgledy-piggledy’ it’s a herd of pigs. Or a flock of cats, of course.

Here’s part of a satirical poem by Ogden Nash about government attempting to control production by paying farmers NOT to produce:

“Higgledy piggledy, my black hen,
She lays eggs for gentlemen.
Gentlemen come every day
To count what my black hen doth lay.
If perchance she lays too many,
They fine my hen a pretty penny;
If perchance she fails to lay,
The gentlemen a bonus pay.

Abracadabra, thus we learn
The more you create, the less you earn.
The less you earn, the more you’re given,
The less you lead, the more you’re driven,
The more destroyed, the more they feed,
The more you pay, the more they need,
The more you earn, the less you keep,
And now I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord my soul to take
If the tax-collector hasn’t got it before I wake.”

HIGH ON THE HOG

Living “high on the hog” means enjoying affluence and luxury.

One might assume that this phrase originated hundreds of years ago. It’s easy to picture nobility dining on roasted suckling pig, while the peasants made do with pig’s feet. But the phrase is not found in print until the 1900s.

The word “high,” however, has been used in Britain since the 1600s and in the US since the 1800s, to mean impressive, exalted, superlative. Used this way, the word alluded to people’s status, as is seen in the terms “high-life” (1700s), “high-table” (1400s) and “high-heaven” (800s). An entry in *Samuel Pepys Diary* for July 1667, includes, “Where it seems people do drink high.”

One theory for the source of this phrase is that the best cuts of meat on a pig come from the back and upper legs and that the wealthy ate the expensive cuts from “high on the hog,” while the peasants ate belly pork and feet, from “low on the hog.”

“High on the hog” is, perhaps, popular partly because of the alliteration. Also, the word “hog” can mean greedy and that may be a connection.

The popularity of “high on the hog” is obvious: it’s been used as titles for a movie, a band, and a good many enterprises to do with food.

HOCUS-POCUS

“Hocus-pocus” in today’s world describes talk that is meaningless, or words deliberately made deceptive so that you don’t see what’s actually happening. It was and still is also used in that way by stage magicians, the same as “abracadabra” and “shazam,” when bringing about some kind of change.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that the word arose in the early 1600s, from *hax pax max Deus adimax*, a pseudo-Latin phrase used as a magic formula by conjurors. Jugglers and street entertainers often “borrowed” other common Latin phrases to use on audiences who were generally ignorant of the language.

The earliest known English-language work on magic, or what was then known as legerdemain (sleight of hand), was published anonymously in 1635 under the title *Hocus Pocus Junior: The Anatomie of Legerdemain*.

Sharon Turner says, in *The History of the Anglo-Saxons*, that the words were believed to be derived from Ochus Bochus, a magician and demon of the North.

The exotic-sounding phrases were designed to fool some of the audience into believing that mysterious forces were being conjured up. Of course, now as then, these charm or incantation words and phrases provide that essential element required for all conjuring tricks: distraction.

Jugglers and magicians led a dangerous life in those early days. If they could be dismissed as performing sleight of hand tricks, then they were just stage entertainers. If they were thought to be using actual magic powers, they were clearly witches and had a grim, and short, future.

So, what do you do? You want to fool people, but not die at the stake. That would be a juggling act indeed. The quandary must have, now and then, led to the juggler hurrying backstage, gasping, “Get the hell out of Dodge!”

HOI POLLOI

“Hoi polloi” comes from Greek, and means, literally, “the many” or “the people.” In English, it has a negative connotation to signify the masses, the plebeians, the rabble, the riffraff, and the proles (proletariat).

In his Funeral Oration, as mentioned in *Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War*, Pericles uses the phrase in a positive way when praising the Athenian democracy, contrasting it with *hoi oligoi*, “the few.”

In English, the earliest known example in print is a 1668 essay by John Dryden, in which he uses Greek letters for the phrase. It was generally accepted then that one must be familiar with Greek and Latin to be considered well educated. Knowledge of these languages served to set apart the speaker from the hoi polloi in question, who were not similarly educated.

There have been numerous uses of the term in English literature. Thomas De Quincey uses it in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. W. S. Gilbert used it in 1882 when he wrote the libretto of the comic opera *Iolanthe* and it is clear that the term is derogatory in its referral to the lower classes.

The term has appeared in several films and radio programs. For example, one of the earliest short films from the Three Stooges was *Hoi Polloi* (1935). The phrase was also used in a dramatic scene in the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989).

HOITY-TOITY

Haughty, snobbish, or pretentiously self-important. As with many reduplicated phrases, one word carries an existing meaning, and the other is present for emphasis.

In the 1600s, the word meant “frolicsome, romping, giddy, flighty,” but that meaning has now almost completely died out. These days, hoity-toity is defined by the “looking down the nose” manner adopted by characters like Hyacinth Bucket, in *Keeping Up Appearances*.

The later meaning isn’t seen until around the mid to late 1700s and is recorded in O’Keefe’s *Fontainebleau* in 1784: “My mother...was a fine lady, all upon the hoity-toities, and so, good for nothing.”

The earlier meaning of the term came from the word *hoit*. This verb (obsolete) meant to indulge in riotous, noisy mirth. That in turn was formed from hoyden — a boorish clown or rude, boisterous girl. Hoyden may have come from the Middle Dutch *heiden*, a heath, therefore a yokel. If that is true, hoyden is a close relative of heathen.

Being hoity-toity is not a good idea. If your nose is held too high, you can’t see where you’re going, and might trip over something.

HOLD YOUR TONGUE

When someone says to you, “Hold your tongue!” that person wants you to keep quiet, to remain silent. The word “hold” is meant in the sense of “refrain from.”

Chaucer used the idiom in *The Tale of Melibus* (c. 1387): “Thee is better hold thy tongue still, than for to speak.” A variant appears in the traditional wedding service, telling anyone who knows that a marriage should not take place to “speak now or forever hold your peace.” This appeared in the first half of the 1300s.

The idiom means almost the same thing as “bite your tongue,” which dates to the 1590s. The *Oxford English Dictionary* uses an example from Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* (1593): “So Yorke must sit, and fret, and bite his tongue.”

If you actually do bite your tongue, meaning to hold it between your teeth, it is extremely difficult to speak, which would stop you from saying something that you might regret.

To me, the expression “bite your tongue” seems to encourage the speaker to punish his tongue for uttering something unpleasant. This would make the expression one of reproof rather than warning. It can be a way of saying, “Shame on you!”

And, on this subject, I will henceforth hold my tongue.

HOLY CATS!

“Holy cats” is an exclamation of bewilderment, surprise, or amazement. Nobody seems to know when or where it originated.

It might, or might not, be related to the Monastery of St. Nicholas of the Cats on the island of Cyprus, home to hundreds of cats. The monastery was founded in CE 327, by Kalokeros, the Byzantine Roman governor of Cyprus. The mother of the Emperor Constantine, St. Helena, was named patron of the new foundation.

Not long after the monks took up residence, a terrible drought led to the island being overrun by snakes, some poisonous. The infestation became so severe that many villagers fled the island and the monastery itself was unsafe to visit.

St. Helena had 1,000 cats shipped to the island of Cyprus to combat the snake epidemic. The cats hunted and killed most of the snakes in the Akrotiri Peninsula, which soon came to be known as the “Cat Peninsula.” For more than 1,000 years, the cats kept the snake population at bay and took regular meals in the monastery.

However, in 1570, the Ottoman Turks invaded the island with an army of over 60,000 warriors. The Christian Greeks and monks were slaughtered, their lands given to Turkish peasants and merchants.

The monastery was rebuilt and abandoned several times, and in 1983, assigned to a group of

nuns. Unfortunately, the snakes had come back in the intervening years, but the nuns knew what to do. They acquired new cats, took care of them, and turned them loose on the snakes. The cats of St. Nicholas are back on duty and a Google search for St. Nicholas of the Cats will show pictures of them lounging about the monastery in the warm Cypriot sun.

HONKY-TONK

A cheap or disreputable bar, club, or dance hall, typically where country music is played. It also means ragtime piano music. Lyrics tended to focus on working-class life, often with tragic themes of lost love, adultery, loneliness, alcoholism, and self-pity.

Honky-tonks are common in the South and Southwest US. Many eminent country music artists, such as Jimmie Rodgers, Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline, Johnny Horton, Ernest Tubb, and Merle Haggard, began their careers as amateur musicians in honky-tonks.

Honky-tonk music was an important influence on the boogie-woogie piano style, as indicated by Jelly Roll Morton's 1938 record *Honky Tonk Music* and Meade Lux Lewis's hit *Honky Tonk Train Blues*. New Orleans native Fats Domino was another honky-tonk piano man, whose "Blueberry Hill" and "Walkin' to New Orleans" were hits on the popular music charts.

The honky-tonk sound has a full rhythm section playing a two-beat rhythm with a crisp backbeat. Steel guitar and fiddle are the dominant instruments.

The origin of the term is unknown. The earliest use in print appears to be an article in the *Peoria Journal* dated June 28, 1874, stating, "The police spent a busy day today raiding the bagnios and honky-tonks."

Early uses of "honky-tonk" in print mostly appear along a land corridor roughly coinciding with cattle drive trails extending from Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas, into south central Oklahoma, suggesting that the term may have been a localism spread by cowboys driving cattle to market.

One theory is that the "tonk" portion of the name may have come from the brand name of a piano made by William Tonk & Bros., an American manufacturer of large upright pianos (established 1881), which made a piano with the decal "Ernest A. Tonk."

The first music known as honky-tonk was a style of piano playing related to ragtime but emphasizing rhythm more than melody or harmony. The style evolved in response to an environment in which pianos tended to be out of tune and have some non-functioning keys.

The honky-tonk was the predecessor of the present-day cabaret or night club, the principal differences being that honky-tonks had lower prices and no pretense of "class."

HOOTENANNY

Informal gathering with folk music and often dancing.

The word is a colloquialism that was used in the early 1900s Appalachia, a region heavily settled by Scottish immigrants. Hootenanny is a Scottish word for party or celebration.

In modern times, the word most commonly refers to a folk music party with an open mic. Performers are welcome to get up and play in front of an audience. However, the word is also a placeholder name to refer to things whose names are forgotten or unknown, as in: “Hand me that hootenanny.”

Hootenanny was also used by the leadership of early firefighting battalions to describe a “meeting of the minds” of higher-ups or various department heads. The term has trickled down and is now used, with some frequency, at working incidents and other circumstances that require a focused discussion among key individuals. Most recently it was adopted for use during the annual Fire Department Instructors Conference.

Pete Seeger said he first heard the word hootenanny in Seattle, Washington, in the late 1930s. It was used by Hugh DeLacy’s New Deal political club to describe their monthly music fundraisers. After some debate, the club voted in “hootenanny,” which only narrowly beat out “wingding.”

Seeger and other members of the Almanac Singers later used the word in New York City to describe their weekly rent parties, which featured notable folksingers of the time. In a 1962 interview in *Time*, Joan Baez said that a hootenanny is to folk singing what a jam session is to jazz.

HORNSWOGGLE

Bamboozle, bluff, deceive, delude, dupe, fool, hoodwink, trick, or swindle and first recorded in the USA in the 1800s. A similar phrase is “pull the wool over your eyes.”

A character in Jack London’s *The Valley of the Moon* (1913) bitterly complains, “We’re hornswoggled. We’re backed to a standstill. We’re double-crossed to a fare-you-well.” A few years later, P. G. Wodehouse used it in *Little Warrior*: “...a man ought not to be held accountable for what he says in the moment when he discovers that he has been cheated, robbed—in a word, hornswoggled.”

A Dictionary of the Old West suggests that it comes from cow-punching. A steer that has been lassoed around the neck will “hornswoggle,” wag and twist its head around frantically, trying to get free of the rope. A cowboy who lets the animal get away with this is said to have been “hornswoggled.” It’s a good explanation, but there’s no proof that it’s right.

HUBRIS

“Hubris” is exaggerated pride or self-confidence, and often combined with arrogance. The proverb “pride goeth before a fall” sums up the modern use of hubris.

Hubris often indicates an overestimation of one’s competence, accomplishments, or capabilities.

It may also indicate a lack of humility and an excess of ignorance. Arrogance is the feeling that one has a right to demand certain attitudes and behaviors from other people.

“Hubris” originated in ancient Greece, where it had different meanings depending on the context. In legal usage, it meant assault or sexual crimes and theft of public property. In religious usage, it meant transgression — an outrage or a sin — against a god.

A common instance of hubris was when a mortal claimed to be better than a god in a particular way. Such claims were rarely left unpunished. So, Arachne, a talented young weaver, was transformed into a spider when she said that her skills exceeded those of the goddess Athena.

Aristotle defined hubris as shaming the victim merely for the perpetrator’s own gratification. “Naive men think that by ill-treating others they make their own superiority the greater.”

Literature offers many examples of hubris. Victor in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* manifests hubris in his attempt to become a great scientist; he creates life through technological means but comes to regret his project.

HULLABALOO

“Hullabaloo” means a loud uproar, mixture of noises, din, and commotion. Bartlett’s *Dictionary of Americanisms* (1848) has it as “hellabaloo,” meaning riotous noise and confusion.

The word originated in the 1700s, though no one knows exactly where it came from.

The word has been spelled in such a myriad of ways that “hullabaloo” has to be considered some dictionary’s arbitrary ruling. When it appeared for the first time, in Smollett’s *Adventures of Sir Launcelot Greaves* of 1762, it looked quite different. “I would there was a blister on this plaguy tongue of mine for making such a hollo-ballo.”

One theory is that it derives from the French *hurluberlu*, meaning scatter-brained. This appears to have been first used by Rabelais in the 1500s. However, being scatter-brained doesn’t necessarily mean you’re noisy.

QUICK BITES

HANKY-PANKY — Trickery or double dealing (1841). More recently, sexual shenanigans. A nonsense term that was simply made up, with an attractive alliteration or rhyme, like “the bee’s knees.” The words themselves have no inherent meaning.

HAVE A FINGER IN EVERY PIE — Be involved in a lot of different activities. Shakespeare used it in *Henry VIII*:

“The devil speed him!
No man’s pie is freed
From this ambitious finger!”

HAVE SKIN IN THE GAME — Invest time and/or money pursuing a goal where there is some risk of loss. A common term in business, finance, gambling, and politics. For example, the owner of a racehorse has skin in the game. The phrase may have come from Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Shylock stipulates that Antonio must pay a pound of flesh as collateral in the event of default on a loan. And you think your bank is unreasonable!

HEEBIE-JEEBIES — Anxiety, apprehension, jitters, the willies (1920s)

HELL ON WHEELS — Describes a person noted for hell raising. Wikipedia says that *Hell on Wheels* is an American/Canadian Western TV series about the construction of the First Transcontinental Railroad across the US and was broadcast from November 2011 to July 2016. The series chronicles the Union Pacific Railroad and its laborers, mercenaries, prostitutes, surveyors, and others who lived, worked, and died in the mobile encampment, called "Hell on Wheels," that followed the railhead west across the Great Plains.

HET UP — Angry, agitated, highly excited. "Het" is a short form of "heated" and has been used that way since the 1300s. As odd as "het" may sound, similar forms are standard with some other verbs, such as "meet" (met), "feed" (fed), and "lead" (led).

HIGHFALUTIN — Pretentious, high-flown oratory, pompous, self-important (1839).

HIS NIBS — A mock title often used to refer to a self-important man, especially one in authority or someone seen as aloof. It's modelled after the references to the British aristocracy, such as "his lordship." The phrase is recorded first in print about 1820 but may well be older. *The Oxford English Dictionary* says the origin is obscure. In cribbage, the term is used when the deck is cut to reveal the top card, called the "starter." If this card is a jack, the dealer scores two points for "his heels" or "his nibs," or "his nob."

HIT THE NAIL ON THE HEAD — To hit the nail on the head means to come up with the perfect solution to a problem, or to express a thought with precision. The origin of the phrase is unknown, but it appears in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, circa 1438, which is an account of the life of religious visionary Margery Kempe and may be the earliest surviving autobiography written in English.

HOBNOB — To drink sociably; mingle; chat informally (1550).

HOTTER THAN THE HUBS OF HELL — A euphemism for "hotter than the hobs of Hell," the earlier version. The word "hub" is a variant of "hob," which means, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "In a fire-place, the part of the casing having a surface level with the top of the grate." It is where you put things to keep them warm without burning up.



— I —

IN A NUTSHELL

Summing something up concisely, or “in a few words.”

In 77 CE, Roman scholar, Pliny the Elder, told a story. His words were translated into English in 1601 by Philemon Holland, who included this explanatory note: “We find in Histories almost incredible examples of sharpness of the eyes. Cicero hath recorded, that the poem of Homer called *The Iliad*, written on parchment, was enclosed within a nutshell. The same writer maketh mention of one who could see to the distance of 135 Miles.”

I find that impossible to believe. *The Iliad* is about 700 pages long and, in Homer’s day, would have been written on clay tablets. But it makes a nice story.

The use of “in a nutshell” to mean specifically “in few concise words” didn’t begin until the 1800s. Thackeray used it in print in *The Second Funeral of Napoleon*, 1841.

IN CAHOOTS

In league with or collaborating for nefarious ends. May also mean a company or partnership.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that the expression came from the Scots in the 1500s, with a little help from the French. More specifically, that the expression is “probably” from the French *cahute*, meaning a cabin or a poor hut. Another theory is that the word came from French *cohorte*, meaning “accomplice.”

Jonathan Green’s *Dictionary of Slang* suggests that the word arose from the American slang word “cahot,” meaning pothole. That doesn’t ring true to me, but perhaps I just don’t like potholes.

The word (if it actually is the same one) reappeared as “cahoot” in early 1800s America, where the phrase “in cahoot” meant in partnership or in league with.

The *OED*’s first citation comes from *Chronicles of Pineville*, a collection of sketches about backwoods Georgia by William T. Thompson from the early 1800s: “I wouldn’t swar he wasn’t in cahoot with the devil.”

The word “cahoot” apparently continued to be used in the singular for a couple of generations. The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s first citation for the plural “cahoots” is from a manuscript diary of G. K. Wilder (1862): “Mac wished me to go in cahoots in a store.” And “cahoots” it’s been ever since.

IN DIRE STRAITS

If you're "in dire straits," you're in desperate trouble or impending danger.

"Dire" first appeared in English in the mid-1500s, as a mutation from Latin *dirus*, and it became popular as a useful adjective to mean extremely serious. "Straits" are narrow passages of water which connect two larger bodies of water. Navigating straits can be perilous. In the mid-1500s again, straits came to mean any difficult situation, one that carries a high degree of trouble.

The idiom "in dire straits" originated from sailors having to negotiate dangerous waters, like a narrow or tight and difficult-to-maneuver channel of water such as the Straits of Gibraltar.

Apparently, the only use of "straits" in Shakespeare is from *As You Like It*: "I know into what straits of fortune she is driven." "Straits" and "in straits" and "in a strait" (and even "great straits" and "desperate straits") were long used figuratively but didn't show up paired with "dire" until much more recently.

The phrase is used literally rather than figuratively in the 1700s, from the epic poem *The Argonautics of Apollonius Rhodius*, in translation by Francis Fawkes:

"When now the heroes through the vast profound,
Reach the dire straits with rocks encompass'd round."

It was used in a speech by Franklin D. Roosevelt in July 1933: "It was... absolutely essential to do something about the physical needs of hundreds of thousands who were in dire straits."

The musical group *Dire Straits* was formed in 1977 and had their first hit — "Sultans of Swing" — in 1978, but they didn't hit the big time until 1980, when they got two Grammy nominations.

IN LIKE FLYNN

This rhyming phrase has long been associated with Errol Flynn, an Australian actor who had a reputation for womanizing, drinking, and brawling.

In 1942, two under-age girls accused him of statutory rape. A group was organized to support Flynn, named the American Boys' Club for the Defense of Errol Flynn (ABCDEF). The trial took place in 1943, and Flynn was cleared of the charges.

According to etymologist Michael Quinion, the incident served to increase Flynn's reputation as a ladies' man, which influenced the connotations of the phrase "in like Flynn." Many early sources say it emerged as war slang during World War II.

In addition to the Errol Flynn association, etymologist Eric Partridge presents evidence that it refers to Edward J. Flynn, a New York City political boss who became a campaign manager for the Democratic party during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency. Boss Flynn's "Democratic Party machine exercised absolute political control over the Bronx.... The candidates he backed were almost automatically 'in.'"

The word “in” had been used for success, good fortune, or sexual conquest for some years prior to the 1940s; for example: Alfred Mason’s *Clementina*, 1901: “His luck for the moment was altogether in.”

Considering the prior use of “in” and human delight in rhyming phrases, I can imagine that “in like Flynn” might have arrived in the language before Errol Flynn arrived in America.

But he certainly gave it some pizzazz!

INTERROBANG

An “interrobang” is a non-standard punctuation mark indicating a question expressed as an exclamation. The punctuation mark consists of an exclamation point and a question mark superimposed one on top of the other.

A sentence ending with an interrobang asks a question in an excited manner, expresses excitement or disbelief in the form of a question, or asks a rhetorical question. It can be said to be the typographical equivalent of a grimace or a shrug of the shoulders.

Represented by ?!, !?, ?!?, or !?!, the interrobang is used to combine the functions of the question mark and the exclamation point. The term “interrobang” was first proposed in 1962 by Martin K. Speckter.

Speckter chose the name to reference the punctuation marks that inspired it: *interrogatio* is Latin for “rhetorical question” or “cross-examination;” *bang* is printers’ slang for the exclamation mark.

The interrobang was in vogue for much of the 1960s; the word appeared in some dictionaries, and the mark was used in magazine and newspaper articles. It is almost never seen today. Though most fonts do not include the interrobang, it has not disappeared.

A reverse and upside-down interrobang suitable for starting phrases in Spanish, Galician and Asturian, which use inverted question and exclamation marks, is called an “inverted interrobang” but is rarely used. The emphatic ambiguity in Hispanic languages is usually achieved by including both sets of punctuation marks one inside the other. As an example, the phrase meaning “Really!” would be “¿¡De verdad!?” or “¡¿De verdad?!”

The State Library of New South Wales, in Australia, uses an interrobang as its logo, as does the educational publishing company Pearson, which intends to convey “the excitement and fun of learning.”

I don’t like the combination of the two marks into one, because it’s difficult to discern whether it’s an interrobang or just a printing smear. But I like the idea of using both. Stuffy people forbid the use; the rest of us say why not?!

IN THE NICK OF TIME

Just in time or at the last possible moment.

The expression began prior to the 1500s as “pudding time.” In those medieval times, pudding was a savory dish, usually made of sausage or haggis, and was served at the beginning of a meal. Therefore, to arrive at pudding time was to arrive just in time to eat. This phrase is first seen in print in John Heywood’s glossary *A dialogue conteinyng the number in effect of all the prouerbes in the Englishe tongue*, 1546.

So why did the Tudors change it to “the nick of time”? One can only assume that people wanted to express a more accurate time than “around the beginning of a meal.” At that time, the “nick” referred to was a notch or a small cut on a tally stick used to keep score or to measure, and was synonymous with “precision.”

The first example of the phrase as it’s used today appears in Arthur Day’s *Festivals*, 1615: “Even in this nicke of time, this very, very instant.”

Ben Jonson makes a reference to watches and musical instruments being adjusted to precise pre-marked nicks in the play *Pans Anniversary*, circa 1637: “For to these, there is annexed a clock-keeper, as grave a person as Time himself, who is to see that they all keep time to a nick.”

The word “nick” is not limited to time but is used to mean many different things. For example, for the English, “in the nick” means “in prison,” for the Scots, “in the valley between two hills,” and for the Australians, “naked.” Another British meaning is “theft,” as in “my car’s been nicked.” It’s also a name for the devil, as in “Old Nick.”

The meanings do vary wildly, but we could put them together like this: “I’m in the nick because I was caught running like the Old Nick in the nick between two hills, looking for my nicked car.”

QUICK BITES

IGNIFY — To start a fire, to ignite, also a software company.

ILLYWHACKER — From Australian English, an illywhacker is a small-time confidence trickster. To “whack the illy” means to sell fake diamond pins, patent razors, or infallible tonics and so on. Illywhacker was almost obsolete, but given new life when Peter Carey made it the title of his 1985 novel, short-listed for the Booker Prize. “Australians used to be champions in the art of bulldust, lords of the tall story, illywhackers of stature and bearing. How low we have sunk. If there’s something wrong with this country, it’s got to be the poor standard of lying.” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 August 1995). How sad if such a delightful word were to fade away again.

IN THE SAME BOAT — To have the same problem as someone else. It was first used by ancient Greeks about the risks that all passengers in a small boat at sea had to face together. The metaphor clearly alludes to the fact that one cannot get off a boat once it is under way and to the people in the boat sharing the same fate, whether they choose to or not.

ITHYPHALLIC — A type of meter used in ancient Greek poetry. Credited to Archilochus, the meter was that of the Bacchic hymns, which were sung in the rites during which (presumably wooden) phalluses were carried in procession at these festivals. It is used now to mean having an erect penis, usually used of figures in an art representation, and for the prudes among us, also means obscene or lewd.



— J —

JACK OF ALL TRADES

A man who can turn his hand to many things.

The phrase is often a compliment for a person who is good at fixing things, and has broad knowledge, a generalist rather than a specialist. Terms resembling “jack of all trades” appear in almost all languages. Whether they are meant positively or negatively depends on the context.

The quasi-New Latin term *Johannes factotum* (Johnny do-it-all) was famously used by Robert Greene in 1592 when he dismissively refers to actor-turned-playwright William Shakespeare with this term, the first published mention of the writer. The English-language version of the phrase appeared in 1618.

The “master of none” addition began to be added in the late 1700s. The headmaster of Charterhouse School in England, Martin Clifford, in a collection of notes on the poems of Dryden, circa 1677, wrote: “Your Writings are like a Jack of all Trades Shop, they have Variety, but nothing of value.” Today, the full phrase generally describes a person whose knowledge, while covering several areas, is superficial in all of them.

“Jack” is a derivative of the common name “John” and has been used simply to mean “the common man.” This usage dates to the 1300s. As “common men,” medieval Jacks were pretty much at the bottom of the social tree. The *OED* defines the generic meaning of the name Jack thus: “A man of the common people; a lad, fellow, chap; especially a low-bred or ill-mannered fellow, a knave.”

Various trades had Jacks: lumberjacks and steeplejacks. Sailors were Jack-tars. Many tools were also named for Jack, for example:

- Smoke-jack (a roasting spit)
- Jack-plane (a basic carpenter’s plane)
- Jack-screw (a lifting winch)
- Jack-frame (a carpenter’s sawhorse)
- Bootjack (for pulling off boots)
- Jack-engine (a miner’s winch)
- Jack-file (a coarse file)

JIGGERY-POKERY

Trickery, deceitful or dishonest practices for personal profit. Synonyms include baloney, bunkum, hogwash, flim-flam, flumadiddle, rubbish, hooey, hot air, and poppycock.

The word “jiggery-pokery” has a pleasing rhythm and is a classic example of a double dactyl. A dactyl is a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables. “Dactyl” comes from the Greek word for finger, the three joints representing the three syllables.

The word is first found in print at the end of the 1800s. The *English Dialect Dictionary* quotes an example: “I was fair took in with that fellow’s jiggery-pokery over that pony.”

Among the Scots, the word “jouk” (from the 1100s) led to using joukery or jookery to describe underhanded dealing or trickery. “Pawky” is another Scottish word, meaning artfully shrewd. And, by 1686, some inventive Scottish speakers had combined the words in the phrase “joukery-pawkery,” which they used to describe clever trickery or sleight of hand. From there, it was a short linguistic path to becoming jiggery-pokery.

Another form of the word, “joukery-cookery,” is more specific in that “cookery” means “cooking the books.”

As a former accountant, I’ve seen my share of “cooked books.” They were nicely browned, but bloody in the center.

JIGSAW PUZZLE

Recent articles have commented on how fast the demand for jigsaw puzzles has risen during the coronavirus lockdown. One of the largest manufacturers reported a rise of 370 percent for a recent two-week period over the same period last year.

I’m part of the reason for that rise. I hadn’t done any jigsaw puzzles since I was a kid and now I’m an addict. Being a wordsmith, I wanted to know why jigsaw puzzles are called that.

A jigsaw is a tool with fine teeth and a narrow blade which can cut curves in wood or metal. With the right blade, you can cut shapes in a variety of materials. A jigsaw puzzle, on the other hand, is a tiling puzzle that requires the assembly of differently shaped interlocking pieces. Typically, each individual piece has a portion of a picture; when assembled, the jigsaw puzzle produces a complete picture.

John Spilsbury, a London cartographer and engraver, is credited with commercializing jigsaw puzzles around 1760. The name “jigsaw” came to be associated with the puzzle around 1880 when fretsaws became the tool of choice for cutting the shapes. Since fretsaws are distinct from jigsaws, I’d say the puzzles should be called fretsaw puzzles.

Most modern jigsaw puzzles are made from paperboard, easier and cheaper to mass-produce than the original wooden models. An enlarged photograph is glued onto the cardboard before cutting. This board is then fed into a press. The press forces a set of hardened steel blades of the desired shape through the board until it is fully cut, like using a cookie cutter. The forces involved, however, are much greater and a typical 1000-piece puzzle requires a press that can generate upwards of 700 tons of force to push the knives of the puzzle die through the board.

New technology has enabled laser-cutting of wooden or acrylic jigsaw puzzles. The advantage of cutting with a laser is that the puzzle can be custom-cut into any size, or any shape, with any number of pieces. Jigsaw puzzles come in many sizes for adults, from 300 to 40,000 pieces. The

largest commercially available puzzle has 52,110 pieces, which is downright scary to someone who regards a 1,000-piece jigsaw as a challenge.

JONESING

If you're "jonesing," you have a strong need, desire, or craving for something. In current slang use, jonesing has evolved from a narcotics-addiction origin to a general yearning. It seems to have shouldered aside the phrase "to have the hots for."

Examples: "I'm jonesing for a little ganja." "I'm jonesing for some soul food."

"Jones" and "jonesing" are first found in written form pertaining to prohibition times.

Later, in the 1960s, a "jones" was strictly a craving for heroin. Junkies had been using "Mr. Jones" as a code name for the drug since it became popular with beatniks in the late 1950s. "I'm looking for Mr. Jones" was a good way to score when you were new in town and didn't yet have a regular dealer. The term evolved as the years went by and eventually, when an addict was alternately sweating and shivering while in need of a fix, he or she was described as "jonesing."

In the early 1970s, "jones" had expanded to describe any sort of severe longing or craving, whether for food or a relationship or a shiny new sports car. But there's no evidence to support the idea that it came from "keeping up with the Joneses."

JUMPING THE SHARK

"Jumping the shark" describes a significant change in a long-running TV series. This can be a small new gimmick or something that totally changes the show, like a shift in the genre itself. This usually happens because the writers feel that the show must be updated to stay fresh. But it usually has the opposite effect — the viewers realize that the show has finally run out of ideas.

This pejorative phrase comes from a 1977 episode of the sitcom *Happy Days*, in which the character Fonzie jumps over a shark while on water skis. This betrayed Fonzie's character development. In an earlier episode, Fonzie is seriously injured while jumping his motorcycle over fourteen barrels in a televised stunt, and he admits that it was stupid of him to do something so dangerous just to prove his courage. So, by jumping the shark, Fonzie has forgotten an important lesson, and the show is now repeating itself.

The use of the phrase has broadened, indicating the moment when a brand, design, franchise, or creative effort's evolution declines, or when it changes into something unwelcome. Long-running US TV shows can be exceedingly lucrative and those who benefit naturally don't want them to end. But those that have not "jumped the shark" are few and far between.

In 1997, Jon Hein created a website to publish his current list of approximately 200 television shows and his opinions of the moments each "jumped the shark." Hein subsequently wrote *Jump the Shark: When Good Things Go Bad*.

JUMP THE GUN

Act before the appropriate time.

The phrase originated with track and field races, where it began as “beat the gun.” The gun referred to is a starting pistol, a small revolver used to fire blanks to signal the start of a race.

To literally “jump the gun” (or pistol) means to cross the starting line, either accidentally or on purpose, before the gun actually fires, thereby gaining an advantage, even if only a few seconds, over the other competitors.

An example from Crowther and Ruhl’s *Rowing and Track Athletics*, 1905: “... ‘beating the pistol’ was one of the tricks which less sportsmanlike runners constantly practiced.”

The word “jump” means to “make a sudden, unexpected movement” and has been used this way in other phrases, too, such as “jump someone’s claim” and “jump ship” and “jump the queue.”

QUICK BITES

JACKANAPES — William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, was a well-regarded commander during the Hundred Years’ War. It was during his dukedom (1448-1450) that England lost its possessions in northern France, and he was accused of treason and banished. His family’s coat of arms sported an image of a collar and chain commonly used for leashing pet monkeys, then known as “jackanapes.” People nicknamed the Duke “Jack Napis,” and soon “jackanapes” took on a new life as a word for a cheeky or impudent person and, later, a misbehaving child.

JALOPY — A battered old automobile, or a slang term for an obsolete, worn-out machine or hardware device. The term arose in the US in the mid-1920s and was also spelled jaloupy, jaloppi, and gillogy. There are several theories as to the origin, some decidedly far-fetched. My favorite is this one: the word is derived from the misspelling of “Jalapa,” the name of a Mexican town which is famous for the Jalapeño pepper, and also its former junk-car-scrapping industry.

JOHNNY ON THE SPOT — Someone ready and available when needed (1896).

JUNKIE — Someone addicted to drugs or some other pursuit (1910).

JUNKY — Trashy or unbelievable.



— K —

KANGAROO COURT

A “kangaroo court” is an unauthorized court in which the principles of law and justice are disregarded or perverted. Often, the outcome of a trial has been decided before the trial even begins. Such courts dispense a rough and ready form of justice, or sometimes injustice, and are associated most with frontier settlements, inmates in jail, soldiers at war, and revolutions.

The origin of “kangaroo court” is unknown. The term sounds Australian but kangaroos and their ability to jump were known in the USA before the term is first found in print, which the *OED* says was in *A Stray Yankee in Texas* by Philip Paxton, published in 1853.

The popular theory says the term arose during the California Gold Rush of 1849, when it became necessary to control claim-jumpers. The association between jumping and kangaroos was too strong to resist. An alternative theory is that because these courts are often convened quickly to deal with an immediate issue, they are called kangaroo courts because they “jumped up” out of nowhere. Or the phrase could refer to a kangaroo's pouch, meaning the court is in someone's pocket. But keep in mind that kangaroo courts were also called “mustang courts” in the US.

The term sometimes has a positive connotation. For example, many Major League Baseball and Minor League Baseball teams have a kangaroo court to punish players for errors and other mistakes on the field, as well as in the clubhouse. Fines are allotted, and at the end of the year, the money collected is given to charity.

Described as a kangaroo court is the People's Court of Nazi Germany that convicted people who were suspected of being involved with the failed plot to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944. In the late 1930s, Stalin used the state legal apparatus of the USSR to fabricate charges against his political rivals, and subsequently to eliminate any challenge to his absolute rule.

There are many more examples. Sorry, none involve real kangaroos!

KERFUFFLE

A “kerfuffle” is a commotion, fuss, ruckus, disruption, brouhaha, bother, ado, or flurry. It may generate a lot of sound and fury, but rarely represents anything serious. The word is informal; it doesn't appear in my *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*.

Lexicographers suggest that the initial “ker” imitates the initial sound of “crash,” like the similar words, “kerplop” and “kerplunk.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that “kerfuffle” was originally Scots. The first part, “ker,” may have come from Scots Gaelic *car*, meaning to twist or bend. The second part could be the Scots verb “fuffle” (now used only in local dialect), meaning to throw into disorder, dishevel, or ruffle. This verb first appeared in print in the early 1500s. No obvious origin for “fuffle” is

known and experts suggest it may be linked with Scots “fuff,” to emit puffs of smoke or steam, which in the late 1700s also had a sense of going off in a huff or flying into a temper.

The word is not well-known in the US and *The Lima News* (Ohio), March 22, 2006, had this to say: “President Bush used ‘kerfuffle’ Monday during an appearance in Ohio, and in so doing, created a minor one himself. Some of the president-watchers on duty in the press gallery had to stop in mid-story and explain to America this novel new word from the man who gave us ‘misunderestimated.’”

When there’s only one chocolate left in the box and two people want it, that could well result in a truffle kerfuffle scuffle.

KIBITZ

“Kibitz” is a Yiddish verb, meaning to be a spectator who offers often unwanted advice or commentary. It can also refer to idle chatting or side conversations.

The term can be applied to any activity but is most used to describe spectators in games such as chess and contract bridge.

In bridge, a kibitzer looks over a player’s shoulder and watches how he plays the hand. The kibitzer is expected to remain silent and not impact the game but, when the game is over, may make comments about the bidding and play.

In computer science the term “kibitz” is the title of a programming language that allows two users to share one shell session. Jane Jacobs describes a kibitzer as someone who keeps a look-out on a street, and seeing suspicious activity, intervenes to help the victim. In this way, kibitzers help keep streets safe.

KIBOSH

To put an end to, to dispose of decisively, or to reject.

Several theories exist as to the origin of the word in the early 1800s. One idea suggests that it may come from “kurbash,” a Middle East word for a whip about a yard long, made of hippopotamus or rhinoceros hide. Another says it may have been a clogmaker’s tool, a piece of iron about a foot long.

However, the most likely explanation is that “kibosh” is of Irish origin and means “cabbage.”

Cabáiste, pronounced ki-boshta, is Cork City slang for cabbage. For nearly two hundred years, until 1914, there was a large cabbage market held in that city. In a big warehouse, cabbages were auctioned off to merchants. The auction began when a large hollow silver cabbage (the *Cabáiste*) was placed on the auction block and next to it a sample cabbage from the lot to be sold. When the auction was finished the *Cabáiste* was then placed over the cabbage on display. This was known as putting the *Cabáiste* on it.

The word traveled to England via soldiers, and to Canada. From the *Winnipeg Free Press*, June 12, 2010: “We had been invited to Whiteshell Provincial Park by the Three Fires Society in order to participate in a special First Nations ceremony at a remote, sacred site. Record amounts of rainfall that morning, on top of an access trail already compromised by all-terrain vehicles, effectively put the kibosh on the proceedings.”

KILROY WAS HERE

“Kilroy was here” is an expression that became popular during World War II, showing up as graffiti through all the theaters of war with American troops. The origin is debated, but the phrase and the accompanying doodle became associated with GIs in the 1940s.

The doodle was initially known in the UK as “Mr. Chad” and would appear with the slogan “Wot, no sugar” or similar phrases bemoaning shortages and rationing. He often appeared with a single curling hair that resembled a question mark and with crosses in his eyes.

An example of how the expression was used comes from a 1945 English article: “Men at a military camp near here scribbled over the walls of the canteen: ‘Wot! No beer!’ ‘Wot! No fags!’ ‘Wot! No eggs!’. The commanding officer threatened 28 days detention to anyone caught, but when he returned to his office after parade, he found on his blotting pad: ‘Wot! Only 28 days!’”

According to Dave Wilton, “Some time during the war, Chad and Kilroy met, and in the spirit of Allied unity merged, with the British drawing appearing over the American phrase.”

According to one story, German intelligence found the phrase on captured American equipment. This led Adolf Hitler to believe Kilroy could be the name or codename of a high-level Allied spy.

There are many theories as to the origin of “Kilroy was here.” One theory identifies James J. Kilroy, an American shipyard inspector, as the man behind the signature. In 1946, the *New York Times* indicated J.J. Kilroy as the origin, based on the results of a contest conducted by the American Transit Association to establish the origin of the phenomenon. The article noted that Kilroy had marked the ships as they were being built to be sure that he had inspected a compartment, and the phrase would be found chalked in places that nobody could have reached to make graffiti, such as inside sealed hull spaces.

There are more such theories, but what interests me is that many people had a lot of fun with the phrase. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1946 that Chad appeared on a wall in the English Houses of Parliament after the 1945 Labour election victory, with “Wot, no Tories?” Trains in Austria in 1946 featured Mr. Chad along with the phrase “Wot—no Fuehrer?”

Kilroy has been seen in several TV series and films including Hogan’s Heroes. In 1946, Enterprise Records released a song by NBC singer Paul Page titled “Kilroy Was Here.”

The website *kilroywashere.org* is devoted to the legends of Kilroy. It says, “Kilroy became the

US super-GI who always got there first — wherever GIs went. It became a challenge to place the logo in the most unlikely places. It was said to be atop Mt. Everest, the Statue of Liberty, the underside of the Arc de Triumphe, and scrawled in the dust on the moon.”

The phrase obviously doesn’t have a long history, but many hundreds of thousands of people have gotten a chuckle out of it.

KNOCK ON WOOD

“Knock on wood” (or “touch wood”) is a superstitious phrase said to stave off bad luck. It’s a way of seeking protection against the envy of evil spirits and the anger of gods who take a dim view of humans being too proud to be properly grateful for their good luck. It’s a way to avoid tempting fate.

The custom may originate in Celtic or German folklore, wherein supernatural beings are thought to live in trees, and can be invoked for protection. Pagans thought trees were the homes of fairies, spirits, dryads, and other mystical creatures, and might knock on the wood of the tree to request good luck, or to distract spirits with evil intentions. When in need of a favor or good luck, one politely mentioned this wish to a tree and then touched the bark, representing the first “knock.” The second “knock” was to say thank you. The knocking was also supposed to prevent evil spirits from hearing your speech and stop them from interfering.

Another version holds that the act of knocking was to perk up the spirits to make them work in the requester’s favor. The evil eye and the concept of being jinxed are common phobias and superstitious beliefs in Iranian culture, for example, and Iranians traditionally believe knocking on wood wards off evil spirits.

In Italy, *tocca ferro* (“touch iron”) is used, especially after seeing an undertaker or something related to death.

The Latin version of the phrase, *absit omen*, dates from at least the early 1600s, when it is quoted by John Heywood in his collections of proverbs. In February 1905, *The Syracuse Herald* reported, “Neglecting to knock on wood may have been responsible for the weather’s unseemly behavior today.”

In the US, in the 1700s, men used to knock on the wood stock of their muzzle-loading rifles to settle the black powder charge, ensuring the weapon would fire cleanly.

Now *that* is a sensible reason to knock on wood!

KOWTOW

“Kowtow” is a Chinese word. It means to act in a subservient manner, to fawn, as in kneeling and touching the forehead to the ground in token of worship, or deep respect.

Kowtow began as a salute or act of worship to authority and became a custom by 200 BCE. In

traditional China, the ritual was performed by commoners making requests to the local magistrate, by the emperor to the shrine of Confucius, by children to their parents, or by foreign representatives appearing before the emperor to establish trade relations.

Only vestiges of the tradition remain. In many situations, the standing bow has replaced the kowtow. For example, some, but not all, people would kowtow before the grave of an ancestor, or while making traditional offerings to an ancestor. During a wedding, some couples may kowtow to their respective parents, though the standing bow is today more common. In extreme cases, the kowtow can be used to express profound gratitude, apology, or to beg for forgiveness.

The kowtow remains alive as part of a formal induction ceremony in some traditional trades that involve apprenticeship or discipleship. Chinese martial arts schools often require a student to kowtow to any master. Likewise, traditional performing arts often also require the kowtow.

On two occasions, the kowtow was performed by Chinese envoys to a foreign ruler, the Russian Tsar. In 1731, the Qing emissary to Russia kowtowed before Tsarina Anna, as per instructions by the Yongzheng Emperor, as did Desin, who led another mission the next year to the new Russian capital at St. Petersburg.

“Kowtow” came into English in the early 1800s to describe the bow itself, but its meaning soon shifted to describe any abject submission or groveling. The term is still used in English with this meaning, disconnected from the physical act and the East Asian context of respect.

Viscount Macartney, head of a trade mission to negotiate a deal between Britain and China in 1793, was presented to Emperor Qianlong, but the viscount refused to perform the obligatory kowtow. To the disbelief of the aghast Chinese court, Macartney would only go down on one knee, as he would to the British ruler. Qianlong left in a huff, the trade mission was abandoned, and Macartney was sacked.

Oops!

QUICK BITES

KLUTZ — Clumsy person, blockhead, from Yiddish *klots* “wooden block” (1930s)

KNOCK YOUR SOCKS OFF — Amaze, or impress, or surprise you. In the mid-1800s, the phrase meant to beat someone so badly you’d knock off not only his shoes, but his socks as well. It may once have been connected to the expression, “knock your block off,” which means to hit someone very hard.



— L —

LALOCHEZIA

“Lalochezia” (pronounced lal-o-kee-zia) means the use of vulgar or foul language to relieve stress or pain. The word was formed from two Greek roots: “Lalo-” meaning “speech” and “chesia” meaning “to defecate.”

In several studies, scientists have found a correlation between swearing and the lessening of pain. They suggest that cursing stimulates a certain brain region, leading to decreased activity in pain regions elsewhere. But don’t overdo it. At least one study suggested that overuse of curse words may lessen this effect.

Swearing has been found to reduce stress and anxiety, such as when driving and dealing with bad drivers. Midwives say that swearing is a completely normal and routine part of the process of giving birth.

Researchers also found that swearing to emphasize a point can bolster the persuasiveness of your argument — increasing the perceived intensity of your message but without altering your credibility as a speaker.

The use of obscene or taboo language features in most human cultures. Humans haven’t changed much since we lived in caves, so I suspect we’ve been cursing ever since language was invented. It has many uses: to express emotion, to persuade, to cope with pain and, surprisingly, to be socially polite.

Hearing other people swear may make us feel uneasy because we’re afraid a drama is about to unfold. Swearing links us with our more primitive, emotional selves. The fact that individuals with brain damage to key language areas can nevertheless swear, indicates that compared with regular language, swearing is a special case.

Clark Gable, as Rhett Butler, famously spoke the line: “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” At that time, the word was still censored as profane. The maker of the film was fined for the “damn” but his guess that people would attend the film just for the excitement of hearing that word turned out to be right.

So, swearing should be considered a legitimate means of dealing with your issues. It beats throwing punches.

LEAD PIPE CINCH

A sure thing, or something easy to accomplish.

“Cinch” comes from the Spanish word for a horse’s saddle-girth — *cincha*. A saddle that is tightly cinched is secure or has a firm grip. In the 1870s, the figurative meaning of cinch was to

get the better of somebody, but soon came to mean “a sure thing.”

“Lead-pipe cinch” was often used in contexts where the rich and powerful formed monopolies or indulged in insider trading to cheat the general public. In 1889 Illinois, *The Morning Review* said: “The briber and bribed would sit down to a game of poker and a ‘lead-pipe cinch’ was nothing to the sure thing the legislators had.”

It appears that a “lead pipe cinch” is better than just a plain “cinch,” so “lead pipe” is what grammarians call an intensifier. One explanation is that a cinch was a form of joint used in plumbing and that a lead-pipe cinch was a secure joint. Another is that if a leather saddle cinch was effective, one made of lead would be even more so.

In October 1891, *The Daily Morning Republican* described a bettor’s certainty that his horse Firenzo would win the next day: “The track will be heavy tomorrow, and I’ve got a copper riveted, lead pipe, copyrighted, airtight cinch. Firenzo in the mud — she swims in it.”

LEXOPHILE

“Lexophile” is not found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* nor in several other standard dictionaries. So, is it a “real” word, or about to become one? *Wiktionary* does list the meaning as, “a lover of words especially in word games, puzzles, anagrams, palindromes, etc.” (From Greek *lex* for word, and *phile* for loving.)

The current standard word for a lover of words is “logophile,” which also comes from Greek, since *logo* also means word.

A wordplay list has been making the rounds online and purports to be from an annual *New York Times* lexophile contest. It doesn’t appear that the *Times* has ever had such a contest, since “lexophile” doesn’t show up in a search of the newspaper’s archive. But let’s not quibble over details. Wordplay is a lot of fun and I admire the ingenuity of the lexophiles who thought up the following:

- I changed my iPod’s name to Titanic. It’s syncing now.
- There’s a guy who’s addicted to drinking brake fluid, but he says he can stop any time.
- A thief who stole a calendar got twelve months.
- A will is a dead giveaway.
- Police were summoned to a daycare center where a three-year-old was resisting a rest.
- A bicycle can’t stand alone; it’s just two tired.
- The guy who fell onto an upholstery machine last week is now fully recovered.
- He had a photographic memory, but it was never fully developed.
- Acupuncture is a jab well done. That’s the point of it.
- I didn’t like my beard at first. Then it grew on me.
- I stayed up all night to see where the sun went, and then it dawned on me.
- I’m reading a book about anti-gravity. I just can’t put it down.

LOCK, STOCK, AND BARREL

The whole thing, entire and complete. The earliest meaning for the phrase was “musket.” Guns have been used since at least the Hundred Years’ War in 1450.

In a musket, the flintlock is the firing mechanism. The abbreviation “lock” might have been adopted because the mechanism resembles a door lock. The stock is the wooden butt of the gun. “Stock” is an old term for wooden butt or stump and was used as early as 1495. “Barrel” is an even older word, well-established by the 15th century.

In the early days of firearms manufacturing, individual craftsmen made individual components one at a time. One craftsman made the “lock,” another made the barrel, and the last craftsman, a woodworker, made the stock. At some point, a craftsman started advertising “Lock Stock and Barrel” meaning that you could get your entire gun at one location and did not have to go from craftsman to craftsman to get it finished.

By July 1803, the meaning switched to “the whole thing.” *The Connecticut Sentinel* included a letter that reported on a July 4th celebration in Stratford. One of the toasts was to “Patriotism - Self interest, the cock, lock, stock and barrel.”

LOLLYGAG

Fool around, spend time aimlessly, or dawdle.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* states that at the beginning of the 1900s, lollygag was slang for “fooling around” (sexually, that is). In 1946, one Navy captain issued this stern warning: “Lovemaking and lollygagging are hereby strictly forbidden...”

The word showed up in the US about the mid 1800s. The Iowan *Northern Vindicator*, in 1868, reported: “The lascivious lolly-gagging lumps of licentiousness who disgrace the common decencies of life by their love-sick fawnings at our public dances...” Isn’t that string of alliteration marvelous?

Today lollygag generally means dawdling to avoid serious work. Other words, such as dilly-dally or fiddle, express the same thing. Children are very good at lollygagging when they don’t want to go to school or do homework, knowing that the point of lollygagging is to waste as much time as possible without looking as though you’re lazy. In an office environment, this is a fine art.

The same applies to any construction site. It’s not unusual to see one man digging a ditch with a shovel, and three standing around supervising. At least, that’s what it looks like.

LOSE YOUR MARBLES

When you lose your marbles, you’ve lost your mind, or gone insane, or part of your brain is missing. In any case, your mind isn’t functioning as it should.

This American phrase arose in the late 1800s, probably from the game of marbles, common at the time. To play was always to run the risk of losing all one's marbles and the result might easily be anger, frustration, or despair.

It's a small step from "anger and despair" to the wider meaning of "senseless." All the early citations convey the sense of loss and the consequent reaction to it, but by 1927, the "loss of sanity" meaning had won over "anger and despair."

The 1954 film, *The Caine Mutiny*, linked insanity with marbles when Humphrey Bogart showed his character, the demented Lieutenant Commander Queeg, in court and under stress, restlessly jiggling a set of metal balls. Bogart's performance was so good that many people have assumed the film to be the source of the phrase.

Lately, the expression has been shortened to simply "losing it." But, just to confuse things, "losing it" also can mean losing one's temper. So, you'll have to take your pick among anger, despair, and insanity.

LYING

"Lying" is a common word, and a great article by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* discusses words which mean almost the same thing. The article is witty, interesting, and well worth reading. Would I lie to you?

Palter — act insincerely or deceitfully

Dissemble — hide under a false appearance

Prevaricate — avoid telling the truth by not directly answering a question

Mendacious — likely to tell lies

Fib — a trivial or childish lie

Equivocate — use unclear language to mislead

Perjure — to tell a lie under oath

Half-truth — a statement that is only partially true

Pseudologist — a teller of untruths

Fabulist — a teller of tales, a writer of fables

QUICK BITES

LA-LA LAND — A euphoric, dreamlike, mental state detached from the harsher realities of life. It's also used as a nickname for Los Angeles, California. (1900s)

LAMBASTE — To criticize harshly, censure, reprimand, thrash, beat severely. (1630s) The "lam" in "lambaste" is an old English word meaning "to beat," from an Old Norse root meaning "to make lame." The "scold" sense didn't develop until the late 1800s, when, presumably, the world had become gentler and kinder.

LET YOUR HAIR DOWN — To behave in a free or uninhibited manner. Letting one's hair down was a common part of women's lives in the 1600s. The hair was normally pinned up and only let down for brushing or washing.

LILY-LIVERED — Cowardly. In medieval times, people believed that the liver created blood, resulting in rosy cheeks and glowing good health. Therefore, an ailing liver caused mental or physical weakness. Anyone who was choleric, bilious, or irritable was labelled “liverish.” The lily was synonymous with whiteness and a person might be called lily-cheeked. So, “lily-livered” meant having a pale and bloodless liver. And a person who had no blood in their liver would have no courage and would thus be a coward.

LIVING DAYLIGHTS — This was an idiom for “eyes” in the early 1700s. The “eyes” meaning began going out of use in the 1800s, and then the phrase “beating the daylight out of someone” emerged. Now generally used only as an intensifier, such as “to scare the living daylight out of someone.”

LOADED FOR BEAR — Ready for anything, prepared to fight and win. The phrase originated in North America in the 1800s, when men hunted with muskets, and you could adjust the amount of gunpowder to affect the strength of the charge. Using plenty of gunpowder meant you could kill the most ferocious predator on the continent.

LOSE FACE — To be humiliated, to lose one’s reputation, to suffer public disgrace. In this context, “face” means prestige, dignity, honor, respect, status. It could be also defined as how one appears, or wishes to appear, to friends, family, and business associates. The phrase “lose face” began as a translation of the Chinese phrase *tiu lien*. To “save face” has no direct equivalent in Chinese and is merely the converse of “lose face.” (1899)

LOWER THE BOOM — Slang originating in the early 1900s, meaning to scold or punish a person severely. It has also been used in boxing to mean delivering a knockout punch. A boom is a long spar used on sailboats. In a changing wind, the boom can swing wildly, leaving anyone on deck at risk of being struck. Booms are also used backstage in theatres to move scenery and on ships to handle cargo.

LUBRITORIUM — An automobile service station.



— M —

MADE UP OUT OF WHOLE CLOTH

A story which is completely false.

Back in the 1400s, “whole cloth” meant cloth that ran the full width of the loom, not yet cut up for sewing. But by the 1800s, the expression came to have the opposite meaning. Instead of using whole material, as advertised, tailors were using patched or pieced or stretched goods.

A lie that is “made up out of whole cloth” is not one that consists of stretching the truth, nor one patched together from bits of truth and half-truths. It is a complete lie from beginning to end, a seamless fabric of deception.

“Fabric” appeared in the late 1400s meaning, “building,” anything that could be built or manufactured, but in the mid-1700s, the definition became restricted to its modern use, to mean “textile or cloth.”

“Fabricate,” appearing in the late 1500s, meant, “to make, construct or manufacture.” In the 1700s, that “make or construct” sense led to the use of “fabricate” to mean constructing a story. And, by extension, “fabrication” now means a story that is completely false, a lie.

Many of us stretch the truth sometimes, usually to make a good story better. But, to create a completely new story takes talent.

MAKE A BEELINE

Go the shortest way. This American phrase arose from the knowledge that bees return to their hive by the most direct route. Bees have an incredibly advanced method of navigation, including using the sun and adjusting for time of day and the curvature of the earth in calculating the angle of direction they should fly to find home. The earliest use of it in print appears to be from *The Davenport Daily Leader*, January 1808.

Bees are clever foragers. When a bee finds a source of nectar, it returns to the hive and tells the other bees where it is, using a display called the Waggle Dance. The forager bee performs a short wiggling run — thus the name, with the angle denoting the direction of the nectar-laden flowers and the length of time denoting the distance. The other bees can then fly directly to the source of the nectar, or “make a beeline” for it.

MALARKEY

“Malarkey” has been American slang since the 1920s, and means pretentious, exaggerated, high-flown language that adds up to mere nonsense. The origin is unknown.

One theory on the word's origin is that it was a family name. "Malarkey" does exist as an Irish surname, and perhaps the Malarkeys were great and inventive fibbers.

If that is so, then "malarkey" is an eponym, meaning a word formed from proper nouns, especially personal names. For example, "quisling," which now means a traitor, especially someone who collaborates with an enemy occupation force, comes from the name of Major Vidkun Quisling. He was a Norwegian army officer and diplomat who collaborated with Nazi forces occupying Norway during World War Two. Another example is "bowdlerize," which means to censor a book or other creative work and comes from Dr. Thomas Bowdler. In 1818, he produced "The Family Shakespeare," from which he had carefully removed those words he deemed unfit for the eyes of women and children.

Some researchers have suggested possible links to the Irish word "mullachan," meaning a strong boy or a ruffian, or to the modern Greek word "malakia," which can mean worthlessness.

There's a board game called *Malarky* in which players try to separate real answers from, well, malarkey. The Amazon ad says, "In Malarky, you don't need to know the answers, you just need to make people think you do. A bluffing game that challenges players to invent answers to off-the-wall questions, *Malarky* is won by the person who tells the most believable bluffs." In 1930, *Variety* could pun on the word: "The song is ended but the Malarkey lingers on."

MINCED OATH

A euphemism for profane, blasphemous, or taboo terms to water down the original term's impact. In other words, you're cursing but pretending you're not.

Minced oaths have been used from ancient times in the universal art of swearing. Rhadamanthus, the Cretan king, is said to have forbidden his subjects to swear by the gods, suggesting that they instead swear by the ram, the goose, or a plane tree. Aristophanes mentions that people used to swear by birds instead of by gods, adding that the soothsayer Lampon still swears by the goose "whenever he's going to cheat you."

Common methods of forming a minced oath are rhyme and alliteration. Thus, "bloody" can become blooming, or ruddy. Alliterative minced oaths such as darn or dang for damn allow a speaker to avoid saying the prohibited word.

The minced oath "blank" is an ironic reference to the dashes that are sometimes used to replace profanities in print. By the 1880s, it had given rise to the derived forms "blanked" and "blankety," which were combined to make the name of the popular British TV show *Blankety Blank*. And "bleep" arose from the use of a sound to mask profanities on radio.

Late Elizabethan drama contains a profusion of minced oaths, probably due to Puritan opposition to swearing. Swearing on stage was officially banned by the *Act to Restraint Abuses of Players* in 1606, and a general ban on swearing followed in 1623.

Though there are still some taboos about discussing certain subjects, we are fortunate now in

being more able to say what we honestly think and emphasizing it however we choose. We're still not quite there, though. In 1941, a US federal judge threatened a lawyer with contempt of court for using the word "darn." And recently, a religious organization was up in arms over an advertisement that used "damn."

Here are some examples of minced oaths:

Jesus Christ — crikey, criminy, cripes, Judas Priest
By God — by George, gosh, gum, Jove, begorrah
By Jesus — bejabbers
God blind me — cor blimey
God damn — doggone, dangnation, gosh darned
God rot it — drat
Good God — good grief, goodness gracious, gosh
For Christ's sake — For crying out loud
For St. Michael's sake — For the love of Mike
For St. Peter's sake — For Pete's sake
Fucking — freaking

MIND YOUR OWN BEESWAX

In this phrase, "beeswax" is just a convenient substitute for "business." The phrase "mind your own business" is a direct way to tell someone to pay attention to their own affairs rather than to yours. Changing "business" to "beeswax" was probably done to make it sound a bit funny and therefore a little less harsh.

The first of coins minted by the US under The Coinage Act of 1792, display the words "Mind Your Business" on one side. But the first record of "mind your own beeswax" does not appear until 1929, in a children's book.

One theory for the origin of the phrase was circulated by a chain e-mail, called *Little History Lesson*, in 2000. This story, which is pure myth, says that back in the 1700s and 1800s, women who bore smallpox marks used beeswax to smooth out their complexions. If someone made a comment, a woman would say, "mind your own beeswax," as in, "stop staring at mine." However, rather than using beeswax, women stuck brightly colored pieces of cloth on their faces to cover the marks. They also sometimes used face powder, which was made from lead flakes, not exactly a healthy solution. But there is no record of "mind your own beeswax" until 1929, so I think we can dump the smallpox/beeswax theory.

MIRE

The noun "mire" means boggy ground, or a situation from which it is hard to extricate oneself. The verb, "mire" means to get stuck in mud. It originated in Middle English, from Old Norse *mýrr*, related to moss. A quagmire is a floating (quaking) mire, bog, or any peatland.

Mires are found around the globe. They arise because of incomplete decomposition of organic matter, usually vegetation. The four types, bog, fen, marsh, and swamp have in common the

characteristic of being saturated with water at least seasonally, with actively forming peat.

Most mires are found in the temperate, boreal, and subarctic zones of the Northern Hemisphere. In the sub-tropics, mires are rare and restricted to the wettest areas. In the tropics, mires can again be extensive, typically underlying tropical rainforest.

Mires are used mostly for agriculture and forestry. This involves cutting drainage ditches to lower the water table to enhance forest growth or for use as pasture or cropland. Also, the commercial harvest of peat for fuel is widely practiced in Northern European countries. Tropical peatlands produce raw materials such as wood, bark, resin, and latex.

Mires provide important information on past climates because they are sensitive to changes in the environment and can reveal levels of isotopes, pollutants, macro-fossils, metals from the atmosphere, and pollen. Records of past human behavior and environments can be contained within mires. These may be human artefacts, or paleo-ecological and geochemical records.

Northern peatlands were mostly built up during the Holocene after the retreat of Pleistocene glaciers, but the tropical ones are often much older. Nakaikemi Wetland in southwest Honshu, Japan, is more than 50,000 years old and has a depth of 45 meters.

In their natural state, peatlands are resistant to fire. But, drainage of peatlands for palm oil plantations creates a dry layer of peat that is especially vulnerable to fires.

MISER

A person who hoards wealth, sometimes even going without basic comforts; a mean, grasping person; frugal to a fault. Misers are now often classified as hoarders.

Since Classical times, writers appear to regard misers as eccentrics. In literature, most of the misers are 18th century characters. One of the most famous misers is Ebenezer Scrooge – the lead character in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) by Charles Dickens.

One famous reference to misers is in Aesop's fable of *The Miser and his Gold*, in which the miser buried his gold and came to look at it every day. When his treasure was eventually stolen and he was lamenting his loss, he was advised by a neighbor that he might as well bury a stone (or return to look at the hole) and it would serve the same purpose.

That makes sense. If you're going to worship something, pick a rock. Nobody will steal that.

MOLLYCODDLE

“Mollycoddle” means to spoil or overindulge someone, an extreme form of “coddle.”

The word “coddle” has a long history. It was recorded in print in Jane Austen's *Emma*: “Be satisfied with doctoring and coddling yourself.” But before that it may have meant to “boil gently” as in coddling an egg.

The sense of heating is linked to “caudle,” an old word describing a warm drink of thin gruel mixed with sweet, spiced wine or ale, given chiefly to sick people.

From the early 1600s, “molly” was used to describe a criminal or a prostitute. It was also the common 1700s name for a homosexual man, often in the form “Miss Molly.” A molly house was a male brothel. Later, an American gangster’s girl was called a moll.

MONEY LAUNDERING

“Money laundering” means any act to disguise the source of money derived from criminal activity. Specifically, the “dirty money” from criminal activities is processed through legitimate businesses and converted into “clean money.” Once cleaned, the money cannot easily be traced to its criminal origin, which means the criminals can now do what they like with it.

The term is said to have originated with the Italian mafia and criminals like Al Capone, who allegedly purchased Laundromats to mix illegal profits from prostitution and bootlegged liquor sales with legitimate sales from the Laundromats.

But there is no real evidence that the term originated with the mafia’s laundromats. What makes more sense is that the term “laundering” was chosen because it does what its name suggests: it “cleans” the “dirty” money.

Money laundering may not be the oldest crime in the book but it’s close. Historian Sterling Seagrave wrote that more than 2000 years ago, some wealthy Chinese merchants laundered their profits because the regional governments banned many forms of commercial trading. Much of the merchants’ income came from extortion, bribery, and black marketing.

There are many ways of laundering money, but the typical method involves three steps: placement, layering, and integration. First, the illegitimate funds are furtively introduced into the legitimate financial system. Then, the money is moved around to create confusion, sometimes by wiring or transferring through numerous accounts. Finally, it is integrated into the financial system through additional transactions until the money appears “clean.”

I’ve laundered money. It came out of the washing machine in good shape and squeaky clean.

MONKEY’S UNCLE

The term, in the idiom “I’ll be a monkey’s uncle!” is used to express complete surprise, disbelief, or amazement. It can also be used to acknowledge the impossibility of a situation, in the same way that “pigs might fly” is used.

The term is assumed to refer to Darwin’s *Origin of Species* of 1859, in which he argued the close evolutionary relationship between humans, apes, and monkeys. It would have been originally a sarcastic remark made by creationists. The notion that people were descended from apes was considered blasphemous by many of Darwin’s contemporaries.

But some reference books suggest it dates from the 1920s. One such reference dates to 1925, the year of the widely publicized Scopes Trial in the US, where the term first appeared. The earliest example quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is: “If that’s a joke I’m a monkey’s uncle,” from an Ohio newspaper on 8 February 1925.

Have you noticed that “monkey’s uncle” is almost a rhyming phrase? It’s the repetition of the “unk” sound. And we do love rhyming phrases. Which means that being a “monkey’s aunt” or a “monkey’s cousin” is never going to hit the big time.

MORTAR AND PESTLE

Implements used to crush and grind substances into a fine paste or powder in kitchen, laboratory, and pharmacy. The mortar is a bowl. The pestle is a heavy, blunt club-shaped object. The substance, which may be wet or dry, is placed in the mortar, and the pestle is pressed and rotated on it until the desired texture is achieved.

Materials for mortars and pestles must be hard enough to resist being worn away by the crushing. The material cannot be brittle, or it will break during the pounding and grinding. It should also be smooth, so that small bits of the mortar or pestle do not mix in with the ingredients. Non-porous materials are chosen that will not absorb or trap the substances being ground.

For pharmaceutical use, the mortar and the head of the pestle are usually made of porcelain, while the pestle handle is made of wood. This is known as a Wedgwood mortar and pestle and originated in 1759. Other materials include stone, wood (highly absorbent), bamboo, iron, steel, brass, and basalt. Mortar and pestle sets made from the wood of old grape vines are good for grinding salt and pepper at the dinner table.

Granite mortars and pestles are used in Southeast Asia, as well as Pakistan and India. Large mortars and pestles are commonly used in developing countries to husk grain. These are usually made of wood and operated by one or more persons.

Scientists have found ancient mortars and pestles in Southwest Asia that date back to approximately 35000 BCE. These tools are mentioned in the Egyptian Ebers Papyrus of approximately 1550 BCE, the oldest preserved piece of medical literature.

Mortars are used in cooking to prepare such items as guacamole, hummus, and pesto (which derives its name from the pestle), as well as grinding spices into powder. Some Native Americans use mortars carved into the bedrock to grind acorns and other nuts.

Any tool that contributes to guacamole and hummus is the tool for me!

MOTLEY

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says “motley” is a cognate of medley. When used as a noun, it can mean “a varied mixture.” As an adjective, it is generally disparaging — a motley collection

is an uninspiring pile of stuff, as in the cliché “motley crew.”

“Motley” is the traditional costume of the fool, court jester, or the harlequin character in commedia dell’arte. The harlequin wears a patchwork of red, green, and blue diamonds.

The word originated in England between the 1300s and 1600s, referring to a woolen fabric of mixed colors, and was mentioned in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. During the reign of Elizabeth I, motley served the important purpose of keeping the fool separate from the social hierarchy and therefore not subject to class distinction. Thus, the fool was able to speak more freely.

In the 1700s, “motley crue” appeared as referring to the ragtag crew of a ship and, today, it still refers to ragtag groups of any kind. A popular storyline in fiction is for a motley crew of soldiers or athletes to overcome a more professional opposing side, or for a group of people with little in common to join together.

Then there’s the 1980s heavy-metal band, Mötley Crüe. Apparently, guitarist Mick Mars came up with the name, after hearing another group referred to as “a motley looking crew.” Wikipedia says the two sets of metal umlauts were supposedly inspired by the German beer *Löwenbräu*, which the band members were drinking at the time.

One of the early spellings of “crew,” dating from 1455, is indeed “crue.” No umlauts, though!

MOXIE

Pep, courage, guts, nerve, know-how, determination, attitude, stamina, and aggressiveness.

The word comes from Moxie, a non-alcoholic drink first made by Moxie Nerve Food Company of Massachusetts around 1884 as “nerve food” syrup. The founder, Dr. Augustin Thompson, developed it as a patent medicine, claiming that it cured paralysis, loss of manhood, and softening of the brain. He sought to create a medicine that did not contain the common but potentially harmful ingredients like cocaine and alcohol.

The name may come from the Algonquin Indian word root *maski*, meaning “medicine.” Another theory is that it came from a New England Indian word from Abenaki and means “dark water.” The word’s original use for a cure-all could explain all the meanings presently attached to it.

Moxie was the first carbonated and bottled soft drink to be widely distributed in America, getting into the market before Dr Pepper and Coca-Cola, and heavily promoted in the early 1900s. In the 1920s, the word became slang for guts, courage, and nerve, probably derived from such slogans as “What this country needs is plenty of Moxie!”

The company marketed it as “a delicious blend of bitter and sweet, a drink to satisfy everyone’s taste.” But some people remarked that it needed courage just to drink the stuff, and even today’s supporters admit it’s an acquired taste. The bitter extract was later determined to be gentian root extract, a common substance that has been used in tonics since at least 170 BCE.

Sugar-free Diet Moxie was introduced in 1962, about the same time that Mad magazine began placing the Moxie logo in the background of its articles. As a result of Mad's efforts, sales of the soft drink increased 10%; this led to the "Mad About Moxie" campaign.

On August 28, 2018, The Coca-Cola Company agreed to buy Moxie. And, after a history of some 135 years, Moxie is gone. And, since I'd never heard of "Moxie" until I looked up "moxie," I missed the whole darn thing. My friends are right when they accuse me of living on Mars and only beaming down once in while for coffee.

MUMBO JUMBO

Incomprehensible language, nonsense, or big empty talk, often associated with religious ritual.

"Mumbo jumbo" is often used to express criticism of specialty jargon, such as legalese, that non-specialists have difficulty in understanding. It may also refer to practices based on superstition, rituals intended to cause confusion, or language the speaker does not understand.

The phrase is English and often cited by historians and etymologists as deriving from the Mandingo word, "Maamajombo," which refers to a masked male dancer who takes part in religious ceremonies.

First published in 1899, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* has a titular protagonist whose parents are named "Black Mumbo" and "Black Jumbo."

In *Stranger In A Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein, the character Jubal speaks of Mumbo Jumbo as the "God of the Congo" towards the end of the novel in a talk on the meaning of religions.

Francis Moore, in his 1738 work *Travels into the inland parts of Africa* noted: "The women are kept in the greatest subjection; and the men, so as to render their power as compleat as possible, influence their wives to give them an unlimited obedience, by all the force of fear and terror. For this purpose, the Mundingoes have a kind of image eight or nine feet high, made of the bark of trees, dressed in a long coat, and crowned with a whisp of straw. This is called a Mumbo Jumbo; and whenever the men have any dispute with the women, this is sent for to determine the contest, which is almost always done in favour of the men. The people also swear by the Mumbo Jumbo; and the oath is esteemed irrevocable. There are very few towns of any note that have not one of these objects of terror, to frighten the poor women into obedience."

MY TWO CENTS WORTH

An opinion. The idiom comes from 1400s British use of twopence or tuppence to mean "of little or no value." The American "two bits," (25 cents), is used in a similar way.

The use of "two cent" and "twopenny" as dismissive descriptions of items of very small value dates to 1560. For example, "He cares not two-pence for the land-tax bill" (1744). "Here's my two cents" in the sense of airing an unsolicited opinion dates only to the mid-1920s.

We don't know the source. Perhaps because, at one time, it cost two cents to mail a letter which no doubt contained one or more opinions. Some people have suggested that the ante in a poker game was two cents, therefore one would “ante in” (enter a conversation) by throwing in one’s metaphorical two cents. The gambling explanation sounds attractive, but nothing supports it.

Why do we say, “Here’s my two cents” instead of “Here’s what I think”? We do so to lessen the effect of a possible social trespass. By identifying one’s opinion as being worth only two cents, some of the social crime of butting in unasked is undone — the advice is offered in a self-deprecatory, “Well, this likely isn’t worth all that much, but here it is anyway,” fashion. The one who butted in is at least being humble about it.

A similar idiom is “for what it’s worth,” suggesting that your opinion may not be important or that the hearer may not care, but you’re going to say it anyway.

The US Treasury Department issued a two-cent coin in 1864. Was the Treasury offering an opinion? No, but the two-cent coin was probably discarded as being useless long before Canada’s copper penny bit the dust.

QUICK BITES

MALAPERT — Insolent, bold, impudent, from the 1300s, and a favorite of Shakespeare’s. The prefix *mal-*, meaning “bad,” can be found in many English words, including “malevolent” and “malodorous.” The second half of “malapert” comes from the Middle English *apert*, meaning “open” or “frank.” Putting the two halves together gives us a word that describes someone that is open or honest in a bad way.

MOUCHE — A soul patch (also known as a flavor saver, a lady pleaser, or a jazz dot). It is a single small patch of facial hair just below the lower lip and above the chin. It was popular in the 1950s and 1960s, a style of facial hair common among jazzmen, beatniks, and artists. Jazz flute players who disliked the feel of the flute mouthpiece on a freshly shaven lower lip often sported the look. Jazz trumpeters preferred the goatee for the comfort it provided when using a trumpet mouthpiece. The word comes from the Latin *musca*, meaning fly. It is a French word, pronounced “moosh.”

MUCH OF A MUCHNESS — Similar; difficult to tell apart (1300s).

MUCKRAKING — Stirring up controversy, searching out and publicizing scandalous, embarrassing, or unpleasant information about famous people.



— N —

NEITHER FISH, NOR FLESH, NOR GOOD RED HERRING

This phrase refers to a person or an object that does not belong to a definite category. The original meaning, now obsolete, was that such a person or object was unfit for any purpose. The term was included in John Heywood's 1546 glossary, *A dialogue conteinyng the nomber in effect of all the prouerbes in the Englishe tongue*.

I've heard this phrase worded as, "neither fish, nor fowl, nor good red herring." Since a bird is 'flesh,' there's no difference in meaning between the two versions.

The interesting detail is that the phrase became shortened to "red herring," to mean "deliberately misleading." Red herrings are salted herrings that turn a reddish color during the smoking process. Though there is no apparent logic for the association, today they are synonymous with the deliberate false trails so often used by writers of mysteries or thrillers.

How herrings become associated with the figurative "throwing off the scent" meaning? There are two theories. One has it that the meaning derives from the practice of using the oily, smelly herrings to lay false trails for hunting dogs. This practice is documented from the late 1600s and described in *The Sportsman's Dictionary: Or The Gentleman's Companion* of 1686. Red herrings were used as a training exercise, intended to teach hounds to follow a scent. Since the idea of dogs tracking herring is absurd, the training exercise could be termed a deliberate deceit.

The second theory is that the meaning derives from a trick played by the wealthy English clergyman Jasper Mayne, who died in 1672 and, in his will, left a servant "Somewhat that would make him Drink after his Death," which turned out to be a salted herring.

NIGGARDLY

"Niggardly" means excessively parsimonious, miserly, or stingy; a "niggard" is a skinflint.

It is derived from the Middle English word *nigard*, which is probably derived from Old Norse *nigla*, meaning "to be poor," which itself is most likely derived from *hnøggr* ("stingy"). The word "niggle," which now means to give excessive attention to minor details, probably shares an etymology with niggardly.

"Nigger," a racial epithet in English, derives from the Spanish/Portuguese word *negro*, meaning "black," and the French word *nègre*. Both *negro* and *noir* (and therefore also *nègre* and *nigger*) ultimately come from *nigrum*, the Latin masculine adjective *niger*, meaning "black" or "dark." The first derogatory use of "nigger" dates to 1775.

People who don't know the history of "niggardly" often assume it's a form of "nigger." In 1999, David Howard, an aide to the mayor of Washington, DC, used the word in reference to a budget. This apparently upset one of his black colleagues, who misinterpreted it as a racial slur and

lodged a complaint. As a result, Howard tendered his resignation, which was accepted.

John Derbyshire commented in 2002 that, though he loved to use words considered obscure, he would not use the word “niggardly” among black people, out of politeness and to avoid causing someone to feel uncomfortable, regardless of any non-racial meanings he would intend.

He wrote, “In theory, you, me, and the columnist next door will defend to the death our right to say ‘niggardly.’ But in practice, will we use it?”

NINCOMPOOP

A foolish or stupid person, who often flaunts his stupidity. Synonyms are: jackass, idiot, dunce, imbecile, blockhead, dummy, numbskull, birdbrain, nitwit, dimwit, dumbass, bonehead, dumbbell, silly, and moron.

Dr. Johnson, in his *Dictionary* of 1755, said the word came from Latin *non compos*, as in the medical and legal phrase *non compos mentis*, meaning not mentally competent. But the *OED* commented 150 years later that this supposed origin doesn’t explain versions of the word that were around in the 1600s and early 1700s, such as “nicompoop” and “nickumpoop.”

The French word *nicodème* means “simpleton” and may be the possible beginning of our nincompoop. A second plausible origin is the French *nic à paux*, a term of derision in the late 1500s. Another possibility is also French, *ne comprend pas*, meaning “cannot understand”. The earliest known use of the nincompoop spelling is from 1680.

John Ciardi, in *A Browser’s Dictionary*, asserts that it comes instead from the Dutch phrase *nicht om poep*, meaning “the female relative of a fool.” But, though there was once an English verb poop, meaning “to fool or cheat,” and it did come from Dutch *poep*, the original Dutch word meant a shit or a fart. The English slang “poop” for *faeces* comes from this. The association with a fool came through a slang use of the word by the Dutch (1600s) for a migrant worker from northern Germany.

Thus, the origin of the word is a matter of speculation. One of the earliest literary uses of “nincompoop” occurred in a 1676 play called *The Plain Dealer*, written by British playwright William Wycherley. One character scolds another, calling him a “senseless, impertinent, quibbling, driveling, feeble, paralytic, impotent, fumbling, frigid nincompoop.”

Gosh, he could have just come right out and said, “I like you!”

NITTY-GRITTY

“Nitty-gritty” means the basic essentials, the heart of the matter, the harsh realities, the most vital details. It’s often used in this phrase: “getting down to the nitty-gritty.”

There are several theories for the source of “nitty-gritty.” One says that it’s a derogatory reference to the English slave trade of the 1700s, that it was a term for the debris left at the

bottom of ships after the slaves had been removed and that the meaning was extended to include the slaves themselves. No evidence exists to suggest this is true.

It may have originated in the US as an African American expression used by black jazz musicians, but that's as close as it gets to slavery. It isn't even recorded in print until the 1930s, long after slave ships had disappeared.

Other theories suggest that "nitty-gritty" refers to head lice, or "nits," or to ground corn, known as "grits." But there's no hard evidence to support these, either.

In other words, we don't know where it came from. It's one of many phrases that use rhyming reduplication, for example, namby-pamby or willy-nilly. It could well be that the rhyme was formed as a simple extension of the US adjective "gritty," meaning determined or plucky.

I'll change the phrase to "kitty-gritty." Kitty litter kicked onto tiles is gritty under bare feet.

NO POT TO PISS IN

Before the days of indoor plumbing, bedrooms were equipped with chamber pots, a common house-ware item for centuries, but the saying itself dates only to 1905. However broke people may have been in the past, there weren't many unable to afford vessels to pee into.

The full saying is, "So poor she or he didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of." This was found in *Nightwood*, a novel by Djuna Barnes, published in 1936.

Piss is an old word, arising in the late 1200s, from similar words in French and Latin, according to the *OED*. For centuries, the word was regarded as informal but not especially naughty.

Some piss-compounds are almost as old as the original word. "Pisspot" goes back to the mid-1400s, "piss-burnt" (discolored by urine, often used in tanning and dyeing) dates to the mid-1500s, "piss-prophet" (one who diagnosed diseases through examination of urine), and "piss-house" (a privy) appeared in the 1600s, and "piss-proud" (having an erection due to a full bladder) is from the late 1700s.

"Piss-elegant" (affectedly refined) was first recorded in 1947. To "piss away" (money, for example) is from 1948. The first usage of the British "to piss off" (to go away) was in 1958. "To take the piss out of (someone)," a British idiom meaning "to satirize," first appeared in 1945.

Urine, which is acidic, was once used in tanning leather. It helped loosen any tissue or hair remaining on the skins and softened the hide. Urine was also used in production of dye and gunpowder. But these uses all but disappeared in the 1800s with the advent of modern chemistry and the capability of producing artificial substitutes cheaply and efficiently.

NOT BY A LONG CHALK

"Not by a long chalk" means a wide margin, whether of time, distance, ability, or something

else. In a game, ‘a long chalk’ would mean ‘a lot of points.’

It’s often used negatively. “Is William going to win the election?” “No, not by a long chalk!”

This phrase dates to the days when an accounting or a score of almost any kind was marked up, using chalk, on any handy surface. If you were drinking in a pub, this might be a list of the drinks you owed for. Charles Dickens refers to this in *Great Expectations*.

The expression almost certainly comes from using chalk in pubs to mark the score in a game. Today the practice survives in British pubs mainly in the game of darts. If your opponent has a long chalk, a big score, he is doing well.

A related expression, primarily American, is “not by a long shot.” This idiom is originally military, based on the difficulty of hitting a target at long range, hence an outside chance. Today, “long shot” is mainly used in horse racing and means a horse that has little chance of winning.

QUICK BITES

NAMBY-PAMBY — Childish, lacking character, insipid, sentimental, weak, indecisive, effeminate in behavior and/or expression. It originates from a satirical poem, *Namby Pamby* (1725), by Henry Carey, lambasting Ambrose Philips, who wrote awful sentimental and sycophantic poems that eulogized the children of aristocratic friends. Carey’s *Namby Pamby* had so much success that people began to call Philips himself “Namby Pamby.”

NEW YORK MINUTE — A moment, an instant, a flash, a nanosecond. As Johnny Carson once said, it’s the interval between a Manhattan traffic light turning green and the guy behind you honking his horn. It appears to have originated in Texas around 1967 and refers to the frenzied and hectic pace of New Yorkers’ lives.

NIPCHEESE — Slang for a ship’s purser (bean counter), mean or miserly, late 1700s.

NOT PLAYING WITH A FULL DECK — Describes a person who is mentally deficient. “Deck” refers to a deck of cards. If not playing with the full set of 52 cards, a player will not do well. (1965) A popular but false story was circulated, saying the phrase dates to the 1500s, when a tax was levied against decks of cards. The theory was that if you bought a deck with only 51 cards, you wouldn’t have to pay the tax, but would then not be playing with a full deck.

NULLIBICITY — The state of being nowhere. Sounds relaxing!



ONCE BITTEN, TWICE SHY

The phrase “once bitten, twice shy” means to be very cautious because you’ve had an unpleasant experience and you don’t want to repeat it. If a dog bites you, you tend to avoid that dog, and maybe all dogs, forever after.

Like many such pieces of wisdom, the phrase has been attributed to Aesop. If Aesop did, in fact, use the phrase, it was connected to the story about a dog and a wolf. The dog talks the wolf out of eating him by suggesting he’d taste better if he were fatter. When the wolf later demands the dog submit to being eaten, the dog refuses. The phrase has been used many times since the 1400s.

Wise Words and Wives’ Tales by Stuart Flexner and Doris Flexner (1993), states that the phrase has been a familiar saying in the twentieth century and was used in *The Rescue* (1920) by the English novelist Joseph Conrad, and in *The Apes of God* (1930) by novelist Wyndham Lewis.

ON THE FRITZ

“On the fritz” originated in the early 1900s, and means “out of order,” or “in bad condition,” or “defective,” referring to the malfunctioning of an appliance.

I might say, “the darn computer is on the fritz again.” My mother, who was born in Britain, would have said, “on the blink.” Another synonym is “on the bum.”

“On the blink” may allude to an electric light that flickers on and off. “On the bum” may be derived from bum in the sense of “a contemptible person.”

One theory for the origin of “on the fritz” is this: Fritz is the German nickname for Friedrich and, during World War I, was used to refer to Germans in general. Because of the war, the expression may have sprung from the idea that if there was wrongdoing, the Germans must have had a hand in it.

This is merely a guess, and *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* says of the expression, “origin unknown.”

The *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* does suggest that the phrase may have come from someone called Fritz — in the comic strip called *The Katzenjammer Kids*. In this series, two youngsters called Hans and Fritz got up to some wild capers, messing things up and putting the plans of other members of the comic strip community on the fritz. The strip appeared in newspapers from 1897 onwards, which fits with “early 1900s.”

ON THE LAM

Slang for running away, since roughly the late 1800s.

The root of “lam” is the Old Norse *lamja*, meaning “to make lame,” and the original meaning of “lam,” when it first appeared in English (1500s), was “to beat soundly.”

“Lame” is from the same source, as is “lambaste,” which today means to scold but, back in the 1600s, meant to beat. It’s a double whammy in that the “baste” part is from a Scandinavian root meaning “thrash or flog.”

The change in the meaning of “lam” from “beat” to “run away” probably echoed another slang term for running away — “beat it.” To “beat it” or “lam it” is to rapidly beat the road with one’s feet by running.

By the mid-1800s, “lamming into someone” was often used to refer to schoolyard fights. Perhaps it was through association with schoolboys running away before they were caught fighting (or else, with the victim running away before the first blow) that lamming finally came to be used to mean “to escape” or “to abscond.”

The *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* says that “lam,” “lammister,” and “on the lam” — all referring to hasty departure — were very common in thieves’ slang before the start of the 1900s.

Lam first appeared in print on its own in 1886, in Allan Pinkerton’s memoir, *Thirty Years A Detective*. In it, Pinkerton describes in detail the precise operations of a pickpocketing gang, which used the word “lam” as a warning to leave in a hurry.

Cats and dogs do it, too. To them, the sight of a pet carrier usually means a trip to the vet and a lot of uncomfortable prodding and poking. So what do they do? Take it on the lam!

OUT OF KILTER

Out of order, in poor health or spirits.

“Kilter” arose from an older English word “kelter,” which means “good health, and/or good condition.” The earliest examples in print are mostly from the US, where the phrase is still more commonplace than elsewhere.

It was once widely known as “kelter” in various English and Scots dialects from the 1500s onwards. *The English Dialect Dictionary* has a wonderful quote from a Scottish source: “Eels are said to kelter in the water when they wamble.” (To wamble is to turn and twist the body about, roll or wriggle about, or roll over and over.)

“Wamble” sounds as if it belongs in *Jabberwocky*, Lewis Carroll’s poem in *Through The Looking Glass*.

OUT OF SORTS

A bit unwell, in low spirits, irritable, not one's usual self.

Since the 1600s, "sorts" has been used by typographers to name the metal characters in their boxes of type, so called because they are sorted each into its own compartment, with all of one kind together. The first known use of the word "sorts" in this context dates from 1668.

If a typesetter found a set of sorts empty, he might well have felt grumpy about it. But is that the source of the "out of sorts" phrase?

The first known appearance of "out of sorts" is in *The Proverbs, Epigrams, and Miscellanies* of John Heywood, 1562. That appears more than a century before any mention of "sorts" in typesetting. But perhaps earlier appearances referring to typesetting will eventually be found; after all, Gutenberg invented movable type printing around 1440.

The Latin original of "sort" named the piece of wood used for drawing lots. Later, the same Latin word developed into the idea of one's fate, fortune, or condition. It survived until shortly after Shakespeare's time, when the first reference to "out of sorts" is found.

But "sort" evolved into another meaning in English, describing the qualities or standing of people. Those that we still use today are "your own sort," "the right sort," and "of all sorts." So perhaps "out of sorts" also means a lack of quality.

Another idea is that a pack of cards that hasn't been shuffled is said to be "out of sort" and not suitable for playing with.

I have been playing cards, from cribbage to contract bridge, since I was six years old, and I've never heard "sort" used in that way. It seems to me that a brand-new deck of cards, which comes sorted into suits and in ascending or descending order of value, should be called "in sort." And, when dealt a hand, I "sort" my cards into the appropriate order for whatever game I'm playing.

I think I've sorted that one out.

QUICK BITES

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN INTO THE FIRE — Moving from a bad or difficult situation to a worse one. This proverb originates from a Greek saying about running from the smoke right into the flame. Its first recorded use was in a poem by Germanicus Caesar (15 BCE – 19 CE) in the *Greek Anthology*. The poem tells the story about a hare in flight from a dog which it attempts to escape by jumping into the sea, only to be seized by a "sea-dog." But isn't a sea-dog a sailor?

OCTOTHORPE — Name for the telephone keypad symbol #; also called pound, number sign, hash (hashtag), or crosshatch. This key and the asterisk key were introduced by Bell Laboratories in the early 1960s on the then-new touch-tone telephones. Don MacPherson, a Bell Labs engineer, coined the word from octo- (for the eight points) and Thorpe. Mr. MacPherson helped lobby for

the return of Jim Thorpe's Olympic medals, which were taken away after it was revealed that he was not strictly an amateur, having been paid for playing baseball when he was a youth. The medals were posthumously restored in 1981.

ONCE MORE UNTO THE BREACH — In Shakespeare's play, *Henry V*, King Henry uses this phrase to encourage his soldiers, who are launching an attack through a breach in the walls of French Harfleur. His words are, "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; Or close the wall up with our English dead."



— P —

PADDY WAGON

A “paddy wagon” is a police van.

Early police vans were horse-drawn carriages, the carriage being in the form of a secure prison cell. Later, secure motorized police vans were built in case the prisoner attacked the officers during the journey. To prevent this, police vans were designed with a fixed steel cage in the rear of the vehicle, effectively separating the prisoner from the officers.

The precise origin of the term is uncertain and disputed, though its use dates to the 1800s. There are three theories as to how the term originated.

One theory holds that “paddy wagon” was simply a shortening of “patrol wagon.”

The second theory has to do with the Irish immigrants in the eastern US. “Paddy” was a common Irish shortening of Pdraig (Patrick in English), which was most often used in the 1800s as an ethnic slur to refer to Irish people. Over half the people arrested in New York in the 1840s and 1850s were Irish, so that police vans were dubbed “paddy wagons” and episodes of mob violence in the streets were called “donnybrooks,” after a town in Ireland.

A possible third theory is listed by *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which states that the term “paddy wagon” appeared in the 1930s, “perhaps because formerly many American police officers were of Irish descent.”

“Paddy” has not always been derogatory. The Irish have historically used the term to describe themselves, with it becoming a slur only when it was co-opted by others. The first apparent usage of the word in print is dated 1798.

If I’m ever in a paddy wagon, I hope I’m the one driving.

PEARLS OF WISDOM

“Pearls of wisdom” means wise statements which are metaphorically as precious as pearls.

Since ancient times, pearls, though small, have been associated with high value, jewels best appreciated by a perceptive audience. Therefore, aphorisms, admonitions, adages, and any such sage advice would be characterized as pearls. The term is also used sarcastically to denigrate any superficial, banal, or simply wrong-headed opinion that conflicts with our own.

Pearls of wisdom first appear in John Langland’s poem *Piers Plowman* in 1362 and we’ve since seen other references, such as “do not throw pearls to swine.” That reference is found in the Bible, “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine.”

Pearls from food oysters tend to be small, irregular, and worth very little. Pearl oysters are in a whole different bivalve family and create the pearls you wear around your neck. The pearl oyster creates calcium carbonate (nacre) to cover irritants that enter its shell, often an invading worm or a bead placed there by a human pearl farmer.

One type of pearl oyster is the black-lipped pearl oyster, which can produce a black pearl. These oysters tend to be camouflaged in sand and algae, which is important since, in the past, over-exploitation has caused populations to drop dramatically.

PHONY

Fraudulent, intended to deceive, or mislead, counterfeit.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that “phony” (British spelling “phoney”) is “probably a variant of fawney,” an old slang term for a finger ring, and that comes from fáine, Irish for ring. The Irish probably brought the word to America in the 1800s.

Grose’s *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* says, “Fawney rig, a common fraud thus practiced:—a fellow drops a gilded brass ring, which he picks up in view of the party meant to be cheated, and to whom he disposes of it for less than its supposed value, and ten times more, than its real value.” This trick was first described by George Parker in *A View of Society*, 1781. At that time, “rig” meant “trick or swindle.”

One London jewelry shop specializing in bogus gold rings did substantial business as a fawney factory. Although the ruse sounds implausible today, many such scams were used to part the innocent and naive from their own gold.

The word “phony” showed up in the US in the late 1800s as an adjective meaning “false.”

PINKY FINGER

The “pinky finger” is the smallest finger of the human hand, opposite the thumb, and next to the ring finger. The earliest recorded use of the term “pinkie” is in 1808.

And no, it’s not called “pinky” because it’s little and pink and therefore cute. The word is derived from the Dutch word pinkje, meaning “little finger.”

Amazingly, there are nine muscles that control the little finger and, if you injure it, you lose half the strength of your hand. Though the index and middle fingers function with the thumb, the pinky teams up with the ring finger to provide power.

Pinky injuries occur twice as often as those involving the thumb or other fingers. People may think, because they don’t feel pain and can move the finger, that it’s not broken but it pays to check — repairs to a broken pinky can involve pins, screws, and plates. After the broken bone is set, therapy can include heat, ultrasound, neuromuscular stimulation, and manual exercise.

Although the pinky is small, it's important. Among American children, a "pinky swear" or "pinky promise" is made when a person wraps one of their pinky fingers around another person's pinky and makes a promise.

It is traditional in European cultures for a man to wear a signet ring on the little finger of his left hand. Most Canadian engineers wear the Iron Ring as a symbol of pride in the engineering profession, and it is always worn on the pinky of the dominant hand. In the US, the Engineer's Ring is a stainless-steel ring worn on that same finger.

It is most certainly not necessary to extend the little finger when drinking from a teacup.

PIPE DREAMS

Unattainable or unrealistic hopes or schemes and alludes to the dreams experienced by smokers of opium pipes.

Opiates were widely used by English writers in the 1700s and 1800s, Coleridge being one of the best known. We don't know whether Lewis Carroll used opium himself, but he makes clear allusions to drug use in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

An American piece in print which associates the phrase with opium smoking is from *The Fort Wayne Gazette*, 1895, and bewails the fact that various happenings devoid of rational explanation cannot be printed as stories because it's impossible to prove them. Thus, they are "consigned to the wastebasket as the 'pipe dream' of an opium devotee."

In the late 1800s, opium was regarded as a medicine, without the negative connotations and restrictions that it has today. Many opium products were prescribed by doctors, even for children.

The *Urban Dictionary* lists as one of its best definitions for "pipe dream" this: "World peace and human equality are examples of pipe dreams because humans are more naturally inclined to kill off their competition than to cooperate."

PISS POOR

"Piss" is an intensifier, meaning extremely poor. The phrase is appealing partly because of the alliteration.

Words having to do with excretory functions are routinely used in colloquialisms meant to communicate a meaning of "little or no value." For example: "shit for brains," "not worth a fragrant fart," and "I don't give a crap."

"Piss" began to be attached to other words during the 1900s to intensify their meaning. Ezra Pound invented "piss-rotten" (distasteful or unpleasant) and we've since had "piss-easy" (very easy), "piss-weak" (cowardly or pathetic), and other forms.

“Piss poor” is akin to “dirt poor,” with both piss and dirt serving as figurative terms for items of little worth rather than conveying literal meaning. The earliest known print sighting of “piss poor” dates only as far back as 1946 and may have been invented during the Second World War.

An article titled “Interesting History” was circulated online and claimed, “They used to use urine to tan animal skins, so families used to all pee in a pot and then once a day it was sold to the tannery. If you had to do this to survive you were ‘piss poor’.”

That article was just a bit of mischief. However, as with similar suggestions about origins, it does contain a grain of truth. Urine has been, and still is, used in many parts of the world to prepare hides for tanning, especially to help remove the hair from hides.

The ancient Romans systematically collected urine for this purpose and even levied a tax on it. The emperor Vespasian was most famous for taxing urine in the first century CE. The long-gone French public pissoirs were given the name *vespasiennes* as a direct link to him. Vespasian’s son was said to have objected to the disgusting origin of the tax revenues, to which his father is said to have replied that money doesn’t smell.

PLEASED AS PUNCH

You’re extremely pleased, delighted, or self-satisfied.

The expression derives from the puppet character, Mr. Punch (Polichinello) in Punch and Judy puppet shows that originated in the 1500s in Italian *Commedia dell’arte*.

The show began in Britain in the 1600s. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* has an entry that shows the popularity of the show: “I with my wife ... by coach to Moorefields, and there saw ‘Polichinello,’ which pleases me mightily.”

Punch and Judy shows used to be popular summer-time entertainments on British beaches, but are not performed so much now, since they’re seen as politically incorrect. But the words “politically incorrect” don’t even begin to describe the so-called entertainment. The main character, Punch, is a wife-beating serial killer. He beats his baby to death, as well as his wife, a policeman, and various other characters.

The Punch character is grotesque, self-satisfied, and delighted with his evil deeds, squawking, “That’s the way to do it!” whenever he dispatches another victim. He’s happy to outwit every figure of authority.

The expression is fading into history. And I must say that I’m as pleased as Punch about it.

PLUM DUFF

“Plum duff” is a slang term for plum pudding, which originated in medieval England, and is still traditionally served as part of Christmas dinner.

In spite of the name, the pudding contains no actual plums. In pre-Victorian times, the word “plums” meant raisins. The pudding is composed of dried fruits held together by egg and suet, treacle or molasses, and flavored with cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, ginger, and rum or brandy. It’s usually aged for a month or more; the high alcohol content of the pudding keeps it from spoiling.

During the colonial period, the pudding was used as a symbol of unity throughout the British Empire. Brandy from Cyprus and nutmeg from the West Indies were incorporated and the final recipe included Australian currants, South African stoned raisins, Canadian apples, Jamaican rum, and English beer, among other ingredients all sourced from somewhere in the Empire.

Traditionally, everyone in the household gave the mixture a stir and made a wish while doing so. It was also usual to add small silver coins to the pudding mixture. The coins were believed to bring wealth in the coming year. The pudding is doused in brandy and flamed, ceremoniously brought to the table, and greeted with applause.

The term “plum duff” is first found recorded in 1830-40. The Telegraph reported that “Spotted Dog (or Dick), Plum-Duff, Figgy-Dowdy, Treacle-Dowdy and so on ... are all varieties of suet pudding, the words dog, dick, duff and dowdy all referring to dough. On board ship in sailing days, you wanted warmth and sustenance inside you whenever you could get it. The Navy loved its suet pud.”

POPPYCOCK

“Poppycock” means nonsense, rubbish, empty prattle, or claptrap, and was, in the last century, often used as an exclamation of disagreement.

The word originated around 1852, in the US, probably introduced by Dutch immigrants.

An oft-repeated theory is that the word came from the Dutch word *pappekak*, meaning “soft excrement,” but the *Oxford English Dictionary* states there is no such word in the Dutch language. There is, however, the very similar word, *poppekak*, which was once used to mean “excessive religious zeal.” What a difference one vowel makes!

One source says that the literal meaning of the word *poppekak* is “as fine as powdered doll shit.” The first half of the word is the Dutch *pop* for a doll (which could be related to a term of endearment, “poppet”). The second half is essentially the same as the Old English “cack” for excrement.

But *pop* is Dutch and “cack” is English. I don’t see how they can be welded together to come up with the Dutch word *poppekak*. Still, this kind of speculation is what makes research on weird words so interesting.

Poppycock is a brand of candied popcorn but, after learning of the name’s probable origin, I think I’ll pass.

POSH

Aristocratic, wealthy, elegant, toffee-nosed, swanky.

A very popular urban myth says that “posh” originated from the phrase “Port Out Starboard Home.” It sounds plausible, but many language experts say it’s nonsense.

The most elaborate rendition of the story cites the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company which was the major steamship carrier of passengers between England and India from 1842 to 1970. The cabins on the port side on the way to India got the morning sun and had the rest of the day to cool off, while starboard ones got the afternoon sun, and were still hot at bedtime. On the return trip, the opposite was true. The cooler cabins were the more desirable and reserved for the most important and wealthiest travelers. Their tickets were thus stamped P.O.S.H. to indicate these accommodations—in large violet letters, according to one recollection. This account of the origin of “posh” was even used in advertising by the P. & O. in the 1960s.

But the story is a myth. The first appearance of POSH in print that we know of was a letter to the editor of the London Times Literary Supplement of 17 October 1935. And as late as 1962 the librarian of the P&O was unable to find any evidence that P.O.S.H. was actually stamped on anything.

Of course, acronyms are fun, even if the explanations are wrong. For one example, golf (gentlemen only, ladies forbidden), and for another, cop (constable on patrol) are nonsense, but they keep turning up. Acronyms are a twentieth century phenomenon and researchers haven’t found any examples before the 1920s. Which is hardly surprising, since the word “acronym” itself wasn’t coined until the 1940s. Any explanations of older words as acronyms, like “golf,” or “posh,” are sure to be false.

There are other theories about “posh.” The most likely source is a term in the Romany language spoken by gypsies in 1600s England: “posh-houri,” meaning “half-pence.” The posh component of that compound word stuck around, attracting the slang meaning of money. In 1830 the word was used in print as a term for money (“He had not got the posh yet”). A reasonable assumption is that, over time, a slang term for “money” came to mean “someone who has a fair bit of money,” which then jumped to mean “something that costs a lot of money” or “something that only the very rich can afford.”

But “posh” was also used to mean “dandy,” so says a slang dictionary in 1890, which indicated that the word had been around for a bit even before that. This meaning is not incompatible with that of luxury and riches.

PULL THE WOOL OVER SOMEONE’S EYES

To “pull the wool” over someone’s eyes means to deceive or hoodwink them.

The usual source given for this expression is the wearing of woolen wigs, which were popular with both sexes in the 1500s and 1600s. But, the phrase itself did not originate until the 1800s, in America, and the wearing of wigs had largely died out in the US by the early 1800s. The earliest

example in print appears in the Gettysburg newspaper *The People's Press*, November 1835.

It has been suggested that its origin lies with from a clever lawyer who fooled a judge (who wore a wig), and thus “pulled the wool over his eyes.” This boast from lawyers became common usage to describe a deception performed by a clever individual.

So we don't really know where the phrase originated. If it had been here in Canada, I'd suggest that it came from a winter's afternoon of street hockey, where one kid pulled another's toque down over his face so he couldn't see where the puck was going.

PUT A SOCK IN IT

A way of telling someone to be quiet.

This phrase originated in the early 1900s and is generally used when someone is annoying others by being noisy. Imagine the pleasure of stuffing a sock in that person's mouth!

One of the earliest examples of it to appear in print is a definition of the term in the weekly literary review *The Athenaeum* 1919: “The expression ‘Put a sock in it,’ meaning ‘Leave off talking, singing, or shouting’.” The fact that the publication chose to define the term suggests it had been recently coined.

There is a theory that the phrase arose because people were annoyed by the loud sounds produced by early gramophones, which did not have volume controls. The idea was that the person operating the machine should put a rolled-up sock inside the horn blaring out the sound.

However, it is more likely that the origin of the phrase is unknown, and that the gramophone story was created as a story to satisfy the human desire to have every question answered.

PUTTING LIPSTICK ON A PIG

A rhetorical expression that means you can decorate something but that doesn't change its essential nature.

The phrase seems to have been coined in the 1900s, but the concept may be older. For example, “You can't make a silk purse from a sow's ear” has been in use since at least the middle of the 1500s.

Thomas Fuller, a British physician, noted the use of the phrase “A hog in armour is still but a hog” in 1732. The *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1796) noted that “hog in armour” alludes to “an awkward or mean-looking man or woman, finely dressed.” The Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon recorded the variation “A hog in a silk waistcoat is still a hog” in his book of proverbs *The Salt-Cellars* (1887).

The word “lipstick” itself was only coined in 1880. The first record of “putting lipstick on a pig” didn't appear until the mid-1900s. In Stella Gibbons' *Westwood* (1946), Hebe visits a hair salon

and has her hair “contemptuously washed by Miss Susan, who had a face like a very young pig that had managed to get hold of a lipstick.”

Ann Richards did much to boost the saying’s political popularity because she used several variations while governor of Texas in the early ‘90s. In 1991, in her first budget-writing session, she said, “This is not another one of those deals where you put lipstick on a hog and call it a princess.” Since then, “lipstick on a pig” has spiced up much political verbiage.

I’d never heard the expression until recently, and I still can’t help visualizing the struggle it would take to hold a pig still and get lipstick on its mouth.

QUICK BITES

PANDICULATION — An instinctive stretching of oneself, as upon awakening, or when yawning, the way a cat does. The word comes from the Latin verb *pandere*, to stretch. (1610s)

PENNY WISE, POUND FOOLISH — Being careful about spending small sums of money but careless with larger amounts. The expression originated in England and was coined by Robert Burton in his work *The Anatomy of Melancholy* published in 1621. Pennies and pounds are long gone, but the philosophy still holds.

PERSNICKETY — Placing too much emphasis on trivial details. Fussy. First documented in English in the late 1800s as an alteration of *pernickety*, a word with the same meaning.

PETTIFOGGER — An inferior legal practitioner (shyster), especially one who deals with petty cases, quibbles over trifles, or uses underhanded or disreputable practices. (Mid-1500s)

PIPING HOT — Very hot, usually referring to food. Refers to the sizzling, whistling sound made by steam escaping from a hot pie.

POGEY — Canadian slang for unemployment or welfare benefit. It’s derived from the Scottish word “pogie” which means workhouse. In the 1500s, this was where beggars, children, and others unable to support themselves were sent to work and in turn be taken care of. The current sense dates from the 1960s.

POUND SAND — Arises from two longer expressions: “go pound sand down a rathole,” and “go pound sand (or salt) up your ass.” It’s disdainful and dismissive, like telling someone to go fly a kite or to go play in traffic, on a par with the forceful suggestion that the recipient should go do something anatomically impossible. The expression is common in the midwestern US.



— Q —

QUADRAGENARIAN

Someone who is 40 to 49 years old. From Latin, c 1830

QUID PRO QUO

Quid pro quo is Latin, literally “something for something, one thing for another.”

Phrases with similar meanings are: “a favor for a favor,” “tit for tat,” “you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours,” and “one good turn deserves another.” Money may be involved, or the transaction may be barter.

In the 1530s, for English speakers, the term referred to substituting one medicine for another. If you went to an apothecary to get medicine and he didn’t have it, he’d give you a *quid pro quo* — a substitute. By 1654, though, the expression was generally used to refer to something done for personal gain or with the expectation of reciprocity. It is now used, in legal and diplomatic contexts, to describe an exchange of equally valued goods or services.

According to *The Law Dictionary*, a *quid pro quo* “is nothing more than the mutual consideration which passes between the parties to a contract, and which renders it valid and binding.” Thus, if everyone on both sides understands the expectation that something will be given in return for a good or service, the contract is valid.

In the US, if the exchange appears excessively one-sided, courts may question whether a *quid pro quo* did actually exist, and the contract may be held void.

In US labor law, workplace sexual harassment can take the form of *quid pro quo* when a supervisor requires sex, sexual favors, or sexual contact from an employee/job candidate as a condition of their employment.

In my quiet little part of the world, *quid pro quo* usually means, “I’ll buy the coffee today, if you buy it tomorrow.”



— R —

RAMBUNCTIOUS

Energetic, noisy, exuberant, and boisterous; lacking in restraint or discipline.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word is an alteration of “rumbustious” (1777), meaning “unruly, or boisterous.” “Boisterous” is probably an alteration of “robustious” (1548), meaning “sturdy, strong,” which in turn comes from “robust.”

The root of these words is the Latin *rōbustus*, which the *OED* relates as something “made or consisting of oak, physically strong, powerful, firm, durable, solid, capable of resisting change.”

This energetic word arose in the US in the early 1800s. It’s first recorded in *The Boston Transcript*, Sept. 1, 1830: “If they are ‘rumbunctious’ at the prospect, they will be ‘rip-roarious’ when they get a taste.”

Rip-roarious is a great word, even if it isn’t officially recognized as one.

READ THE RIOT ACT

Today, “reading the riot act” means warning an unruly person to stop behaving badly.

An actual *Riot Act* was passed by the British government in 1714. Under this English law, any group of twelve or more persons which worried the authorities could be deemed a “riotous and tumultuous assembly” and then arrested if they didn’t disperse within an hour of the *Riot Act* being read to them by a magistrate. If not, their just punishment would be prison, labor, or death. This seems harsh to us now but, in the 1700s, the government was fearful of Catholic Jacobite mobs who threatened to over-throw George I. The fear was well-founded, as supporters of the deposed Stuarts did invade in 1715 and in 1745.

The *Riot Act* contained this warning: “Our sovereign Lord the King chargeth and commandeth all persons, being assembled, immediately to disperse themselves, and peaceably to depart to their habitations, or to their lawful business, upon the pains contained in the act made in the first year of King George, for preventing tumults and riotous assemblies. God save the King.”

It was, apparently, crucial to read the Act aloud to serve formal notice that the parties involved were overstepping their bounds. Punishment for ignoring the Act was severe — penal servitude for at least three years, or imprisonment with hard labor for up to two years.

After the Hanoverians were established in power, the *Riot Act* began to fall into disuse and had become a rarity by the 1900s. However, the Act wasn’t formally repealed until 1973.

Wikipedia tells me that Acts like the *Riot Act* passed into the law of countries such as Australia,

Canada, and the United States, all at the time colonies of Great Britain, and in several of them such provisions, in their original or modified forms, remain as law today.

It doesn't do me the slightest bit of good to read the riot act to my calico cat.

RESTING ON YOUR LAURELS

This means you're satisfied with your past success and consider further effort unnecessary.

The use of laurel leaves to celebrate achievements originated with the leaders and athletic stars of ancient Greece. Laurel leaves were closely connected to Apollo, the god of music, prophecy, and poetry. Apollo was depicted with a crown of laurel leaves, and the plant eventually became a symbol of status and achievement.

The association between Apollo and laurel comes from the myth of Apollo's passion for the nymph Daphne, who turned into a bay tree to escape him. Undeterred, Apollo embraced the tree, cut off a branch to wear as a wreath and declared the plant sacred.

Victorious athletes competing in the ancient Pythian Games (forerunner of the Olympics) received wreaths made of laurel branches, and the Romans later adopted the practice and presented such wreaths to generals who won important battles. Venerable Greeks and Romans, or "laureates," were thus able to "rest on their laurels" by basking in the glory of past achievements.

Following the decline of the Greek and Roman empires, the use of laurel as an emblem of victory didn't appear again until the Middle Ages. Geoffrey Chaucer referred to laurels in that context in *The Knight's Tale*, circa 1385. Since the 1800s, the phrase has been used for those who seem overly satisfied with past triumphs.

We continue to call those who are especially honored laureates although laurel (bay) leaves are usually kept for kitchen use. Nobel Laureates get a pretty medal and 10 million Swedish Krona and Poets Laureate (in the UK at least) get a salary and a butt of sack (barrel of sherry). But now, the phrase is used with a distinctly disapproving tone. "One-hit wonders" tend to be sneered at.

Which seems to me highly unfair. If you've managed to make it over the top once, why do you have to do it again? Sit back, relax, enjoy a glass of sack!

RIGHT AS RAIN

Things are absolutely fine, just the way they should be.

The phrase originated in Britain, where rainy weather is normal, and was first recorded in 1894. Part of the reason for its popularity may be the alliteration.

Since medieval times, there have been several expressions beginning "right as" and always in the sense of something being satisfactory, secure, or comfortable.

- right as an adamant (1400)
- right as a line (1546)
- right as a trivet (1837, Charles Dickens)

If English speakers had lived on the Wet Coast of British Columbia in medieval times, they would certainly have come up with the “right as rain” phrase. Rain is the price we pay for living in paradise.

RIGMAROLE

“Rigmarole” means complicated, bothersome nonsense, a long rambling discourse, or a lengthy procedure.

The word appears around 1736, apparently adapted from “ragman roll,” meaning a list or catalogue. The meaning did not become “foolish activity” until 1939.

The story behind “rigmarole” goes back to a thirteenth century list of names known as the Ragman Roll. Edward I of England forced members of the Scottish nobility to swear fealty to him by signing oaths of allegiance that were collected on several parchments. Together, these parchments, with their strings and ribbons hanging out, made up what came to be called the Ragman Roll.

Why Ragman? There’s some disagreement about that. The oldest form was “rageman,” said as three syllables, which suggests it may have been French in origin. A character called Rageman the Good appeared in some French verses around 1290. Others think it might have come from rag in the sense of tatters, used as a name for a devil (as in ragamuffin, originally a demon). Another idea is that it may contain a Scandinavian root related to cowardice (in Icelandic *ragmenni* means coward).

Ragman was also the name of a game where a scroll of parchment had strings hanging from it that pointed to various (probably bawdy) verses in the scroll. Players would choose a string to find their verse, and it would be read out to the entertainment of all. This same system may have been used for a gambling game.

The word has a nice rhythm and rolls easily off the tongue, but describes something long, irritating, and complicated. Like an income tax return, perhaps.

RUBBERNECK

To “rubberneck” means to look about or stare with exaggerated curiosity, craning one’s neck to get a better view. The idea is that a person twists, turns, and bends his neck about in a manner that resembles the properties of rubber. Today, the term is often used to refer to the activity of motorists slowing down to see something on the other side of a road or highway, often the scene of a traffic accident.

“Rubbernecking” was coined in America in the 1890s to refer to tourists. H.L. Mencken said it is

“one of the best words ever coined.” By 1909 “rubbernecking” was used to describe the tours around American cities.

One writer described rubbernecking as tourists stretching their necks to see New York while having misinformation shouted at them. The rubbernecking tours were also referred to as “gape wagons” or “yap wagons.”

RUCKUS

A noisy fight or minor disturbance, a commotion, much ado about very little. “The dogs would set off quite a ruckus when they heard something in the woods.”

Some writers suggest that “ruckus” is a combination of two words, “rumpus” and “ruction,” with quite different origins. “Rumpus” was coined in the 1700s by European students to describe a riot or uproar. Today we use it in “rumpus room” where the family can be noisy. The original “ruction” was the Irish Insurrection of 1798, a violent rebellion. “Insurrection” had been abbreviated to “ruction,” which came to mean any destructive and violent quarrel.

The word might also have grown out of “rook,” a Scottish word recorded from 1808 that meant a quarrel or uproar.

RUNNING AMOK

Indulging in wild, crazy, or erratic behavior.

Wikipedia describes “running amok” as sudden, savage violence against one or more people, usually by a single individual following a period of brooding.

“Amok” first appeared in English in the 1500s, associated with Malaysia and Java, described in the 1516 text *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants*: “There are some of them [the Javanese] who go out into the streets, and kill as many persons as they meet. These are called Amuco.”

“Amok” is probably derived from the “Amuco,” a band of warriors known for indiscriminate violence. Writing in 1772, the explorer Captain James Cook noted, “to run amok is to ... sally forth from the house, kill the person or persons supposed to have injured the Amock, and any other person that attempts to impede his passage.”

This phrase was used as a medical term in the 1700s and 1800s, when European visitors to Malaysia learned of a peculiar mental affliction that caused otherwise normal tribesmen to go on brutal and seemingly random killing sprees, a sort of homicidal mania.

According to Malaysian and Indonesian cultures, amok was deeply spiritual. Some believed the state of amok was caused by an evil spirit entering the body of a person. As a result of the belief, those in Indonesian culture tolerated amok and dealt with the after-effects bearing no ill will towards the assailant.

According to one writer, the Malays, Sumatrans, and Javanese are an extremely gentle, refined, submissive people. In fact, the word “Malay” comes from “malu,” which means gentle, and gentleness is a quality prized above all others among the Malays and their neighbors. In their family life, they obediently submit to traditional and parental authority. But now and then, a man who has behaved in this obliging manner all his life, suddenly revolts against the culture with a homicidal mania.

It has been suggested that amok may be a form of intentional suicide in cultures where suicide is heavily stigmatized. Those who do not commit suicide and are not killed typically lose consciousness, and upon regaining consciousness, claim amnesia.

A widely accepted explanation links amok with male honor, since amok by women and children is virtually unknown.

Police describe such events as killing sprees. Here, if the individual is seeking death, it’s called “suicide by cop.”

RUN THE GAUNTLET

To “run the gauntlet” once meant to endure a form of corporal punishment in which the party judged as guilty was forced to run between two rows of soldiers, who struck at him. Today, it means going through a series of criticisms at the hands of one’s detractors.

The word originates from the Swedish *gatlop*, or *gatu-lop*, and appeared in English in the 1600s, perhaps brought by English and Swedish soldiers fighting in Protestant armies during the Thirty Years’ War. The English word was originally spelled “gantelope” or “gantlope,” but it didn’t take long for “gantlope” to migrate to “gauntlet” — possibly because the words sounded similar or because of the association with the use of gauntlets as weapons and with the antagonism implicit in “throwing down the gauntlet.” That last phrase is first recorded in Hall’s *Chronicles of Richard III*, 1548.

Such punishment was used in Ancient Greek and Roman armies, and in subsequent armies and navies. In Sweden, running the gauntlet was also a civilian punishment for certain crimes until the 1700s. The practice persisted in parts of Germany (mainly Prussia) and Austria, and in Russia, until the 1800s.

The condemned soldier was stripped to the waist and had to pass between a double row of comrades who struck him. A subaltern walked in front of him with a blade to prevent him from running. The punishment was not necessarily continued until death and might, or might not, be followed by execution. Running the gauntlet was considered far less of a dishonor than a beating on the pillory or stocks.

The Royal Navy used running the gauntlet as punishment for minor offences. The condemned had to make a prescribed number of circuits around the ship’s deck, while his shipmates struck him with improvised versions of the cat o’ nine tails. This punishment was abolished by

Admiralty Order in 1806. An example of the Royal Navy's version can be seen in the Hornblower film *The Examination for Lieutenant*.

Several Native American tribes forced prisoners to run the gauntlet. The Jesuit, Isaac Jogues, was subject to this treatment while a prisoner of the Iroquois in 1641.

Today, gauntlets are familiar as the stout leather gloves used for gardening and the like. Medieval gauntlets, or gantlettes, gauntelotes, and so on, formed part of suits of armor. They were usually covered with plates of steel and were as useful for attack as for defense.

The expression has been used for various less severe punishments or tests, often by roommates or fraternity brothers, where they are considered hazing rituals.

Honestly, I'd rather be lashed with a wet noodle.

QUICK BITES

RAGAMUFFIN — A dirty, unkempt child with tattered or ragged clothing. Synonyms include guttersnipe, hobo, vagabond, and tatterdemalion. Its origin dates to the late 1300s, when Ragamoffyn was used as the name of a demon in a poem titled *Piers Plowman*. The Ragamuffin is also a breed of domestic cat, once considered to be a variant of the Ragdoll cat but established as a separate breed in 1994.

RAGTAG AND BOBTAIL — Ragtag, similar to rabble, an unsavory bunch of folks. "Bobtail" was once slang for "contemptible rascal," while tag and rag were both used to mean "torn cloth."

RAPSCALLION — A rogue, villain, scalawag, knave, or rascal. Recorded as early as 1330 and deriving from the Old French *rascaille* (outcast, rabble). The word has a mischievous quality, suggesting the underdogs and Robin Hoods of the world.

RAWKY — Foggy, damp, and cold, as in a raw day

RIGHT OFF THE BAT — Lickety-split, as fast as greased lightning. The phrase likely arose from baseball, where, after a successful hit, the batter immediately runs to first base.

RINKY-DINK — Amateurish, shoddy, small-time, cheap, insignificant (1900s).

RUMPY-PUMPY — Casual or saucy sexual intercourse (1960s).



— S —

SALMAGUNDI

A salad plate of chopped meats, anchovies, eggs, and vegetables arranged in rows for contrast and drizzled with salad dressing. The dish aims to produce a wide range of flavors and colors and textures on a single plate.

One of the earliest recipes appeared in *The Good Huswives Treasure*, 1588-1660. The word is now used mainly to mean a mixture or miscellany, derived from the French word *salmigondis* which means a disparate assembly of things, ideas, or people, forming a jumbled whole.

The name later evolved to “Solomon Gundy” in the 1700s, probably connected with the children’s rhyme, Solomon Grundy, first set down by James Orchard Halliwell in 1842.

“Solomon Grundy,
born on a Monday,
christened on Tuesday,
married on Wednesday,
took ill on Thursday,
worse on Friday,
died on Saturday,
buried on Sunday,
that is the end of Solomon Grundy.”

Solomon Gundy retains its food connotation today as the name given to a spicy Caribbean paste made of mashed pickled herrings, peppers, and onions.

Salmagundi is also purportedly a meal served on pirate ships. It is a stew of anything the cook has on hand.

SALT OF THE EARTH

People considered to be of great worth and reliability.

It originates from the King James Bible, in Matthew 5:13, where Jesus said to his disciples, “Ye are the salt of the earth,” meaning, it appears, that they were more valuable than gold. These words are still used to praise decent and dependable people.

“The salt of the earth” was first published in English in Chaucer’s *Summoner’s Tale*, circa 1386. It is still being used as book titles, and in film and songs.

Salt has always been valuable because it is essential for life and for preserving food. Roman soldiers were paid partly in salt, the origin of our word “salary.” The word is also used in common sayings, such as, “A good man is worth his salt.” In some places, salt was rubbed on newborn babies as protection against evil forces.

But salt is also a poison. In the Middle Ages, salt was spread on land to poison it, as a punishment to landowners who had sinned against society in some way. Today we use salt to kill garden slugs.

Does calling people “the salt of the earth” imply that they’re unsophisticated or simple? No, definitely not!

SASQUATCH

“Sasquatch” is the “official” name of Bigfoot, a creature popularly described as being human-like in form but massive in both size and appetite, usually living in the American and Canadian northwest. Often depicted as ape-like, this hair-covered mammal is believed by arguably delusional people to be the last surviving link between modern man and our evolutionary past. Theory says it has survived so long partly because of its elusive, defensively aggressive, isolationist behavior.

An 1884 article in Victoria’s *British Colonist* is often cited as the earliest documented evidence of a Sasquatch sighting. In his research, John Green, a BC-based author of many books on Sasquatch, compiled a database of 1,340 Sasquatch or Bigfoot sightings in North America between the early 1800s and 1995. According to his analysis of witness accounts, Sasquatch is said to possess superhuman speed and strength. Some also report that Sasquatch is also able to swim. However, not a single shred of verified physical proof has been found.

Like the Yeti of Asia or the Abominable Snowman of the Himalayas, Sasquatch is rooted in indigenous legend and researched by cryptozoologists and enthusiasts. Most consider the creature to be a product of folklore and a hoax. Ecologist Robert Pyle argues that most cultures have accounts of human-like giants in their folk history, expressing a need for “some larger-than-life creature.”

The word Sasquatch may be an Anglicization of the Salish word Sasq’ets, which means “wild man” or “hairy man.” J. W. Burns coined the term in the 1930s, when he was an Indian agent assigned to the Chehalis Band. These people claim a close bond with Sasq’ets and believe it can move between the physical and spiritual realm.

Sasquatch sightings and research have been concentrated in British Columbia near Harrison Lake. The area has embraced this association. The town of Harrison Hot Springs held its first Sasquatch Days in 1938.

In 2012, researchers from Oxford University and the Lausanne Museum of Zoology launched a project to explore the genetic relationship between *Homo sapiens* and other hominids. The team analyzed 36 samples, mostly hair, and most were found to be from bears and other animals like horses, porcupines, and sheep.

Washington State zoologist John Crane said, “There is no such thing as Bigfoot. No data other than material that’s clearly been fabricated has ever been presented.” In addition, scientists cite the fact that Bigfoot is alleged to live in regions unusual for a large, nonhuman primate. All

recognized apes are found in the tropics of Africa and Asia. As with other similar beings, climate and food supply issues would make such a creature's survival in the reported habitats unlikely.

The first scientific study of available evidence was conducted by John Napier and published in his book, *Bigfoot: The Yeti and Sasquatch in Myth and Reality*, in 1973. Napier wrote that if a conclusion is to be reached based on scant extant "hard" evidence," science must declare, "Bigfoot does not exist."

A study in the *Journal of Biogeography* in 2009 found a very close match with the ecological parameters of the American black bear, *Ursus americanus*. They also note that an upright bear looks much like Bigfoot's purported appearance and consider it highly improbable that two species should have very similar ecological preferences, concluding that Bigfoot sightings are likely black bears.

The legend has enough appeal that Canada put out a 39-cent postage stamp of The Sasquatch. And maybe that's about what the legend is worth.

SCALLYWAG (OR SCALLAWAG)

A disreputable fellow, a loveable rogue or a troublesome child. The origins are unclear, but the word seems to be a combination of a very old term "wag" and the Scottish word "scallag."

"Wag," in the 1550s, meant "habitual joker" or "rascal." It may have evolved from "waghalter," which meant "gallows bird"—that is, someone destined to swing from a noose—but was also used to refer to impish children or even clocks with pendulums (called "wag-at-the-walls").

"Scala" began in Scalloway, one of Scotland's Shetland Islands, which was mostly inhabited by poorer farmers who were often called "scallags." "Scallag" and "wag" blended as Scottish farm laborers moved to the mainland and joined early trade unions.

Scalloway had—and still does—wild Shetland ponies. Being small, irritable, and of no use to humans, these ponies were referred to as "scalawags," which in that context meant "undersized or worthless animal." This term also referred to small cattle and sheep in Scotland and the US.

The word appeared in the US in 1848, referring to trade unionists, ponies, and post-Civil War, anti-Confederate, southern white people. As with "carpetbagger," it has a long history of use as a slur in Southern partisan debates. It was not associated with pirates until it appeared in novels and plays about seafaring swashbucklers (1800s).

Reference works such as Joseph E. Worcester's 1860 *Dictionary of the Caribbean Spanish Language* defined scalawag as "A low worthless fellow; a scapegrace."

In the UK, the term "scally" is used to refer to elements of the working class and petty criminality. In the Philippines, scalawags were used to denote rogue police or military officers.

SCARECROW

A decoy or mannequin, usually in the shape of a human. The name is first found in print in the 1500s and is a combination of the words “scare” and “crow.” It was used figuratively, in 1590, to mean “gaunt, ridiculous person.”

The scarecrow has been around a lot longer than that, however. Greek farmers in 2500 BCE carved wooden scarecrows to look like Priapus, son of the god Dionysus and the goddess Aphrodite. Priapus supposedly was ugly enough to scare all birds away from the vineyards and ensure good harvests. The farmers painted their wooden scarecrows purple and put a club in one hand, but a sickle in the other to represent the hoped-for good harvest.

Humanoid scarecrows are usually made from old clothes stuffed with straw and placed in open fields to discourage birds from disturbing and feeding on recently cast seed and growing crops. Scarecrows are used across the world by farmers and are a notable symbol of farms and the countryside in popular culture.

Sometimes, reflective parts movable by the wind are attached to increase effectiveness. A scarecrow outfitted in clothes previously worn by a hunter who has fired on the flock is regarded by some as especially efficacious. Effigies of a predator such as an owl or a snake are also used.

A scarecrow's duties are sometimes carried out by various audio devices. Recorded sounds of deerflies in flight, for example, are used to deter deer from young tree plantations. Automatically fired carbide cannons and other simulated gunfire are used to keep migrating geese out of cornfields.

In *Kojiki*, the oldest surviving book in Japan (from the year 712), a scarecrow known as Kuebiko appears as a deity who cannot walk yet knows everything about the world.

Among many other stories about scarecrows, Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story *Feathertop* is about a scarecrow created and brought to life in Salem, Massachusetts in the 17th century by a witch in league with the devil. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, by L. Frank Baum, has as one of the main protagonists, a scarecrow who is hoping to get brains from the Great Wizard.

In Devon, a scarecrow is called a “murmets,” in England, a “Hay-man,” on the Isle of Skye, a “Tattie Bogal” and on the Isle of Wight, a “Gallybagger.”

There are several scarecrow festivals in England and North America. In the valley region of Nova Scotia, the “pumpkin people” come in the fall months. They are scarecrows with pumpkin heads playing the fiddle or riding a wooden horse. Meaford, Ontario, has celebrated the Scarecrow Invasion since 1996.

In some places, real people are still used to frighten birds from crops, just as they were thousands of years ago. As a child growing up on a homestead, one of my duties was to chase turkeys out of the vegetable garden. I hated the job; it interrupted my reading Agatha Christie mysteries.

SCAT

The word “scat” has several meanings: an interjection used to drive away a cat, to go away quickly, animal fecal droppings, or jazz singing with nonsense syllables. The word has been with us since at least 1838 and, obviously, is very useful.

Apparently, “begone” or “scram” were the only meanings of the word until sometime after WW II. It’s still used to tell a cat to go away — skit scat, kitty cat! And, I’m sure, for other small animals and children as well.

“Scat” also means a piece of excrement left by an animal where some hunter or zoologist can find it. It is a back-formation derived from the word “scatology,” which has two meanings: first, an interest in or treatment of obscene matters especially in literature; second, the biologically oriented study of excrement (for taxonomic purposes or for the determination of diet).

If the scat is fossilized, we call it a coprolite. One geology professor, speaking of a field trip he was on, found a coprolite in a cave. He explained it thus: “Obviously a creature crept into the crypt, crapped, and crept out again.”

“Scat,” as in singing, is more suitable to drawing room conversation. In vocal jazz, scat singing is improvisation with wordless vocables, nonsense syllables, or without words at all. The singer improvises melodies and rhythms using the voice as an instrument rather than a speaking medium. Ella Fitzgerald is generally considered one of the greatest scat singers in jazz history.

The deliberate choice of scat syllables is a key element in vocal jazz improvisation and differentiates jazz singers’ personal styles. Betty Carter used sounds like “louie-ooie-la-la-la” (soft-tongued sounds or liquids) while Sarah Vaughan seemed to prefer “shoo-doo-shoo-bee-ooo-bee” (fricatives, plosives, and open vowels). Ella Fitzgerald’s improvisation mimics the sounds of swing-era big bands with which she performed, while Vaughan’s mimics that of her accompanying bop-era small combos.

Scat singing resembles the Irish and Scottish practice of lilting or diddling, a type of vocal music that involves using nonsensical syllables to sing non-vocal dance tunes. Scat also has an element of humor, depending on what tickles your funny bone.

Finally, a piece of trivia: *Scat Daddy* (2004 –2015) was an American Thoroughbred racehorse who won four stakes races. Retired after being injured in the Kentucky Derby, he went on to become a prominent sire.

I’ll bet he left lots of scat, too.

SCISSORS

Hand-operated shearing tools, used for cutting cloth, paper, string, and other thin material.

A pair of scissors consists of a pair of metal blades pivoted so that the sharpened edges slide against each other when the handles are closed. Modern scissors are often designed

ergonomically with composite thermoplastic and rubber handles which enable the user to exert either a power grip or a precision grip. There are also right-handed and left-handed scissors.

Some scissors have an appendage, called a finger brace or finger tang, below the index finger hole for the middle finger to rest on to provide for better control and more power in precision cutting. A finger tang can be found on many scissors and especially on scissors for cutting hair.

The earliest known scissors appeared in Mesopotamia 3,000-4,000 years ago. But pivoted scissors of bronze or iron, in which the blades were pivoted at a point between the tips and the handles, the direct ancestor of modern scissors, were invented by the Romans around 100 CE.

Pivoted scissors were not manufactured in large numbers until 1761, when Robert Hinchliffe produced the first pair of modern-day scissors made of hardened and polished cast steel. He lived in London and was reputed to be the first person who put out a signboard proclaiming himself “fine scissor manufacturer.”

What intrigued me is the term “pair of scissors” when the instrument is obviously singular.

I found out that “scissors” is an example of a *plurale tantum*, an English word that has only a plural form to represent a singular object. Though *pluralia tantum* name single objects, they are grammatically plural: “the scissors are on the table,” or “my pants are in the dryer.”

Then we began calling an individual scissors “a pair” to emphasize the matched cutting blades. This is now the standard designation for any concrete noun that is a *plurale tantum*: a pair of glasses, pants, trousers, goggles, scissors, shears, tweezers, and so on.

The *pluralia tantum* for cutting tools have, as a group, also been adapted into verbs that are based on a nonexistent singular (just to be confusing). For example: “she tweezed her eyebrows.”

SCREWED, BLUED, AND TATTOOED

You have been thoroughly cheated and victimized. Or you're enjoying the perfect shore leave.

“Stewed” can be added for further effect (*Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* by Partridge). Adding “and sold down the river” means “very drunk.”

The phrase may originally have referred to the process of becoming a full-fledged sailor. In the Pacific Fleet in WWII, if you were in the Navy, the phrase meant that you had landed in a foreign port and done everything of consequence. First, you had been screwed (serviced by prostitutes). Second, you'd been blued (a local tailor made you a couple of sets of Dress Blue Uniforms), and third, you had been tattooed.

Another theory, much harsher, follows the current definition of “screwed” as being cheated. “Blued” may come from the earlier “blewed,” meaning “robbed.” And “tattooed” is recorded in the Chapman's *Dictionary of American Slang* as “struck rapidly and repeatedly.” So, in this sense, you've been cheated, beaten up, and robbed.

A similar phrase, the British “Bitched, buggered, and bewildered” (and “far from home”), is a parody of the popular song from the 1940 hit *Pal Joey*: “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered.”

Sleeze Beez, a glam metal band formed in 1987 in the Netherlands, released their 1989 album *Screwed Blued & Tattooed*, which peaked at number 115 on the Billboard 200 album chart.

SESQUIPEDALIAN

“Sesquipedalian” means polysyllabic, long-winded, and bombastic. Antonyms are: monosyllabic, laconic, brief, terse. The first known use of sesquipedalian was in 1656. The word “sesquipedalian” is, in fact, sesquipedalian.

Horace, the Roman poet and satirist, was merely being gently ironic when he cautioned young poets against using *sesquipedalia verba*—“words a foot and a half long”—in his book *Ars poetica*, a collection of maxims about writing. But in the 1600s, English literary critics used the word to lambaste writers using very long words. For example, Robert Southey wrote, “The verses of Stephen Hawes are full of barbarous sesquipedalian Latinisms.”

Somebody who uses long words is a sesquipedalianist, and this style of writing is sesquipedalianism. The noun sesquipedality means “lengthiness.” If such words are not enough, try using hyperpolysyllabicesquipedalianist for someone who enjoys using really long words. And, for the fear of such words, it’s “sesquipedalophobia,” often exaggerated as “hippopotomonstrosesquipedaliophobia.”

Antidisestablishmentarianism is a sesquipedalia. It’s the longest non-coined and nontechnical word in the English language. Many similar words were used in *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce, who has been quoted as saying, “I’ve put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that’s the only way of insuring one’s immortality.”

Shakespeare, in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, used a 27-letter long word, honorificabilitudinitatibus. It means the capability of being honored and is considered as one of the longest words in literature. Aristophanes, a comedic playwright, created a long Greek word of about 171 letters, meaning a dish consisting of many different ingredients, like fish, dainties, sauces, and flesh.

You know, “stew.”

“Sesquipedalian loquaciousness”: A predilection by the intelligentsia for engaging in the manifestation of prolix exposition through a buzzword disposition form of communication notwithstanding the immediate availability of abundant and comprehensible, punctiliously applicable, diminutive alternatives.

You know, “motor mouth.”

SHAKE A LEG

This means to rouse yourself, hurry up, get out of bed. It was explicitly defined that way in the *New York Magazine* in 1904 and is usually used as a command or request.

To “shake a leg” can also mean to dance. That may have evolved from “shake a heel,” or “shake a foot,” which were 1660s terms meaning to dance. One example is from the *Dubuque Democratic Herald*, October 1863, in an advertisement for a local ball: “Nearly every man in town able to shake a leg has purchased a ticket.”

There is a theory that the origin of “shake a leg” comes from the American Civil War. Supposedly, after a battle, when stretcher-bearers were out in the field collecting the wounded, they would shake a leg or arm of a victim to see if he responded, thus learning whether he was alive or dead. It’s an imaginative story and there’s no proof that it’s true. Besides, what if the poor guy was in a coma?

SHEBANG

Everything involved in what is under consideration (usually used in the phrase “the whole shebang”).

We don’t know the source. It appears suddenly in the 1860s, dozens of times, in US newspapers and literature.

The earliest known example of the word in print appears to mean some form of hut or rustic dwelling. Walt Whitman’s *Specimen Days*, from *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, 1862: “Besides the hospitals, I also go occasionally on long tours through the camps, talking with the men, &c. Sometimes at night among the groups around the fires, in their shebang enclosures of bushes.”

In Suzanne Wilson’s *Column South* (1960), an 1864 diary records officers during the Civil War as “running the shebang” which seemed to refer to a whole encampment or other military establishment.

In 1869, the *Marysville Tribune* printed a list of *The Idioms of Our New West* and defined ‘shebang’ like this: “Shebang is applied to any sort of house or office.”

In *Roughing It*, 1872, Mark Twain uses ‘shebang’ to refer to a form of vehicle. “Take back your money, madam. We can’t allow it. You’re welcome to ride here as long as you please, but this shebang’s chartered, and we can’t let you pay a cent.”

That vehicle usage may suggest a possible link with the name for a form of early UK sightseeing bus, a charabanc (pronounced as sharra-bang). Passengers called these vehicles ‘sharras’ which were common in Britain from the early 1800s into the 1970s. It’s possible that “shebang” is a variant of “sharra-bang” but there’s no evidence.

SHENANIGANS

Trickery, underhand action, intrigue, skulduggery, high-spirited behavior, or mischief.

The earliest record of it is in San Francisco (April 25 issue of *Town Talk*) in 1855.

As to the source, the word looks Irish, and there were many Irishmen working in the California gold rush, so it's reasonable to suggest the Irish word *sionnachuighm* as the source. This means "I play tricks," and is pronounced roughly as "shinnuckeem." Other suggestions include Spanish *chanada*, a shortened form of *charranada*, meaning "trick, deceit." Another guess centers on Irish *sionnach*, meaning "fox."

A different theory is that it comes from an East Anglian dialect word "nannicking," which means playing the fool.

The word was originally used to mean intrigue and skulduggery, as evidenced by a quote from Mark Twain in 1862: "Consider them all ... guilty (of 'shenanigan') until they are proved innocent." By the early 1900s, however, "shenanigan" (especially in the plural form "shenanigans") was being used in a more lighthearted sense to mean "tricks, pranks, silliness."

SHIT HAPPENS

"Shit happens" is a common, vulgar, slang phrase used as a simple observation that life is full of unpredictable and often unpleasant events, which happen to people for no particular reason. The phrase was first observed in 1964 but not used in print until 1983.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* has this to say: "Expressing a resigned attitude to any state of affairs or course of events: these things happen, such is life."

Some humorist applied the saying to various religions and philosophies. These still make me laugh, so here they are;

Taoism — Shit happens.

Confucianism — Confucius say, "Shit happens."

Buddhism — If shit happens, it isn't really shit.

Zen Buddhism — What is the sound of shit happening?

Hinduism — This shit happened before.

Mormonism — This shit is going to happen again.

Islam — If shit happens, it is the Will of Allah.

Stoicism — This shit is its own reward.

Protestantism — Let this shit happen to someone else.

Calvinism — Shit happens if you don't work hard enough.

Pentecostalism — In Jesus' name, heal this shit!

Catholicism — Shit happens because you deserve it.

Judaism — Why does this shit always happen to us?

Zoroastrianism — Shit happens half the time.

Marxism — This shit is going to hit the fan.

Atheism — No shit.

Seventh Day Adventist — No shit on Saturdays.
Existentialism — Absurd shit.
Agnosticism — What is this shit?
Nihilism — Who gives a shit?
Deconstruction — Shit happens in hegemonic meta-narratives.
Christian Science — Shit is in your mind.
Moonies — Only happy shit really happens.
Jehovah's Witnesses — Knock, Knock, shit happens.
Scientology — Shit happens on page 152 of Dianetics
Hare Krishna — Shit happens, Rama Rama.
Hedonism — There's nothing like a good shit happening.
Rastafarianism — Let's roll this shit and smoke it.

SINCE HECTOR WAS A PUP

This phrase means, “a very long time ago.”

The Oxford English Dictionary labels the phrase as an American colloquialism. “Hector may refer to the Trojan hero who lived around 1200 BCE and whose mother Hecuba was, according to Euripides, turned into a dog (hence Hector could be regarded as her pup).”

The expression became popular in the 1920s when many schoolboys studied Greek and named their dogs Hector after the Homeric hero. The phrase is obsolete, though there are similar ones still in use.

For example, in the US military it's apparently common to refer to a period in the distant past as one when Christ was a corporal. Those associated with the RAF in World War Two will know that a time in the distant past was one when Pontius was a pilot.

A further variation on the theme is “when Pluto was a pup.” As the first example in print appears to be from a newspaper advertisement dated 1947, it may have been derived from Disney's dog, who was named in 1931 after the then newly discovered (and now demoted) planet.

Being a cat person, perhaps I could start a new trend. Such as:

- since Cleopatra was a kitten
- since Nefertiti was an itty-bitty kitty

SKEDADDLE

Run away, flee in a panic, or retreat quickly.

The word first appears in the 1860s as American Civil War military slang. “As soon as the rebs saw our red breeches ... coming through the woods, they skedaddled.” There's a hint there of cowardice under fire, but as the word gained popularity in civilian use, it came to mean simply “to run away.”

It may be the alteration of British dialect “scaddle” (to run off in a fright). The *English Dialect Dictionary*, compiled at the end of the 1800s, says it may be from Scots “skiddle,” meaning to splash water about or spill. The *Cassell Dictionary of Slang* suggests this transferred to the US through “the image of blood and corpses being thus ‘spilled and scattered’ on the battlefield before the flight of a demoralized army.” Another theory is that “skedaddle” comes from an Irish word *sgedadol*, meaning “scattered.”

The Atlantic Monthly of January 1877 has a different take on the word’s source. “We used to live in Lancashire and heard skedaddle every day of our lives. It means to scatter or drop in a scattering way. If you run with a basket of potatoes or apples and keep spilling some of them in an irregular way along the path, you are said to skedaddle them.”

The origin of skedaddle is a mystery. If that makes you uncomfortable in using it, you can always say, “Get the hell out of Dodge!”

SKINFLINT

A “skinflint” is a miser, a penny-pincher.

The noun is first recorded in *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew* (London, 1699): “the willingness to go to extreme lengths to save or gain something.” This is like the French phrase which translates as “shave an egg.”

The “flint” in skinflint is the hard stone used to spark fires when struck with iron or steel. Craig M. Carver, managing editor of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, writes about flint and its role in riflery, and how this inspired the word skinflint:

“[The rifle] used a piece of flint held in a hammer-like device, or ‘cock.’ When the trigger was pulled, the spring-loaded cock struck the flint against a steel plate...creating a shower of sparks. The flash of the priming powder in the pan just beneath the steel plate ignited the charge in the bore and fired the weapon.... After repeated firings, the flint was worn down. Most riflemen merely replaced the flint, but some penny-pinchers ‘skinned’ or sharpened their flints with a knife.”

The phrase “to skin a flint” is first recorded in a poem in the 1656 edition of *The Legend of Captain Jones Relating His adventure to Sea: His first landing, and strange Combat with a mighty Bear*.

Flint is plentiful, and the amount of money one would gain from skinning it would not be worth the trouble. A similar idiom from the 1700s is “he would skin a louse (or a flea) for the tallow.”

SKOOKUM

Strong, brave, impressive, fierce, big, and reliable, and may apply to both humans and other animals.

Skookum is a Chinook Jargon word that has historical use in the Pacific Northwest. For example,

“skookum house” means jail or prison. “Skookumchuck” means turbulent water or rapids in a stream or river, “chuck” means water, stream, or lake. It is a common place name in British Columbia, Washington, and Idaho.

“Skook” is a short form used with personal names, such as: Mount Skook Davidson in northern British Columbia and Mount Skook Jim, between Pemberton and Lytton. Local lore in any area of British Columbia may have a Skookum Charlie or a Skookum Brown; the most famous of such nicknames was that of Skookum Jim, a co-discoverer of the Klondike goldfields in the Yukon.

“He’s a skookum guy” indicates that the person is solid and reliable, while “we need somebody who’s skookum” means that a large, strong person is needed. A carpenter, after banging a stud into place, might check it and say, “yeah, that’s skookum.” Asking for affirmation, someone might say, “Is that skookum with you?” “Skookum!” by itself can also mean “Awesome, man!”

In mythology, a skookum is a variety of mountain giant or monster similar to Sasquatch or Bigfoot. Skookums were bad spirits or devils of which crows, eagles, owls, blue jays, or other beasts could be representations. They could inhabit people and cause serious illness.

A derivative usage of the skookum-as-monster context was the application of the name to a souvenir Skookum doll, sometimes simply called “a skookum.” The dolls first started being made in 1913 and were popular from the early 1920s until the 1960s. The dolls resembled Native American people and were sold to tourists at trading posts in the western US.

At first, dolls’ heads were made of dried apples with the bodies made of wood and stuffed with either leaves, straw, twigs, or grass stuffed in a muslin sack. Later they were made of plastic. Some had jewelry or feathered head-dresses. The most common sizes range from about seven inches to about 12 inches tall. They were wrapped with blankets and had only the suggestion of arms.

Skookum is a skookum word!

SKULDUGGERY

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that “skulduggery” means underhand dealing, deceptive intrigue, or trickery. It gives several forms of the spelling. The *OED* even has it as a verb — to skuldug, and quotes William Faulkner using it in 1936.

The word is 18th century Scottish and was originally spelled “sculdudrie.” It refers to an indecent act, usually sexual. It was almost certainly used to describe adultery.

The combination of “skull” and “duggery” (which sounds like an archaic form of “digging”) may remind one of the grave-robbing that was widespread in the 1700s. But the original and more common spelling is “skulduggery,” (with only one ‘l’) and the term has no connection to either skulls or digging.

Probably the word came to North America with Scots immigrants and was perhaps corrupted by the ears of those immigrants from other nations who misunderstood the Scottish accent. In any case, the spelling of words often changes over the years.

Today, “skulduggery” is usually associated with cloak-and-dagger intelligence agencies, but freelancers and domestic political operatives have made good use of “skulduggery” on occasion. It was most famously used in 1980 when referencing Watergate.

SLOW AS MOLASSES IN JANUARY

An Americanism for someone or something that is painfully slow and was in use by 1872, so it did not arise from the Great Molasses Flood in Boston.

Molasses is a fluid of high viscosity that pours slowly and can be expected to move very slowly in cold January weather. The word is derived from the Latin word *mel* for honey. It’s the dark, sweet, sticky, thick syrup left over after all the sugary stuff has been squeezed, pressed, or boiled out of sugar cane. It was used in the manufacture of ethanol to make weapons in WWI, and of course, in the production of rum. It eventually lost popularity in the US when granulated sugar became cheaper and more available.

The Great Molasses Flood happened in January 1919. It was unusually warm — 43 degrees F. But the temperature played no role in what occurred that day in Commercial Street. That’s where a tank filled with 2.5 million gallons of molasses stood, just behind a freight terminal.

Shortly after noon, the tank split wide open, letting loose a tidal wave of molasses. Men, women, children, and several horses were engulfed. High above the scene, an elevated train crowded with passengers whizzed by the crumbling tank just as the molasses broke loose. The flood tore off the entire front of a house and snapped off the steel supports of the elevated train structure. The train had barely gone by when the trestle snapped, and the tracks sagged almost to street level.

Fifteen dead were found by that night, and six other bodies were recovered the next day. Many injured were taken to area hospitals.

A small Boston welding company submitted the lowest bid for cutting up the ruptured tank and cleaning up the mess, but the owner deeply regretted winning the job. Not only did he lose money, but the work was a nightmare. Clothes, gloves, torches, hoses — any sort of equipment — were coated with a layer of sticky molasses within minutes of workers being on the job. Inside the broken tank, molasses had crystallized into a 4-inch layer of sugar, which burned with a thick, choking smoke when contacted by acetylene torches. In the spring, flies swarmed to the area, getting inside workers’ helmets and goggles.

The Great Molasses Flood disproved the expression, “Slow as molasses in January.” One of those injured in the disaster was across the street from the tank when it collapsed. He tried to outrun the wave of molasses, but it caught up with him and he was dragged down into the ooze. So, molasses must run about 25 to 30 miles per hour in January. Which is not slow.

It was an unlikely way to drown. And the true culprit was gravity currents, which come into play when a dense fluid spreads horizontally into a less dense fluid (in this case, molasses into air). The density of the molasses alone would account for the speed of its initial spread.

SMART ALEC

An obnoxious or conceited know-it-all.

The *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* says, “Its first recorded appearance in print was in a Carson City, Nevada, newspaper in 1862. But history doesn’t record who the first ‘smart alec’ was.”

And, from *The Times*, on May 9, 2002, “Regarding the identity of ‘Alec,’ most American dictionaries point to Alec Hoag, a notorious pimp and thief who operated in New York in the 1840s. He operated a trick called ‘The Panel Game’ where he would sneak in via gaps in the walls and steal the valuables of his sleeping or unwary clients. The reputation he generated for not getting caught earned him the nickname Smart Alec.”

Research by historians indicates—based on considerable newspaper article evidence—that the ‘Alec Hoag’ theory for the source of the phrase may be true.

Apparently, to protect himself and his wife from arrest, Hoag enlisted a couple of police officers by promising to split the stolen goods with them. But Hoag’s downfall came when he ran into some financial difficulties and couldn’t give the officers their fair share.

The police soon arrested Hoag and his wife, Melinda. Alec Hoag was then given the nickname “Smart Alec” by the police for being too smart for his own good.

SMART COOKIE

The word “cookie” comes from the Dutch word *koekje*, which means “little cake,” according to *The New Food Lover’s Companion*. The first cookie-like “cakes” were thought to have originated in 7th century Persia, one of the earliest countries to cultivate sugar.

Later, “cookie” became a slang word. *The Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* says that a “smart cookie” is clever, and good at dealing with difficult situations, and that a “tough cookie” is determined to do what he or she wants and usually succeeds.

English playwright, actor, and composer, Noel Coward, once translated “smart cookie” into British as “clever biscuit.”

There are other slang usages of “cookie.” It’s been used in print since 1920 to mean an attractive woman. It’s used to mean the contents of the stomach, in reference to vomiting (“pop your cookies,” 1960s), or “toss your cookies,” (1970s). “Cookie cutter” is used metaphorically to refer to items “having the same configuration or look as many others.” For example, a tract house.

The Cookie Monster is a Muppet on the long-running children's television show *Sesame Street*, who is best known for his voracious appetite for cookies.

The catchphrase “That’s the way the cookie crumbles,” which means “that’s just the way things happen,” is first seen in print in 1955. It’s a variant on the expression, “such is life,” which appears to have originated in the 1700s.

That’s the way the ball bounces and the mop flops.

SMARTY-PANTS

“Smarty-pants” means “know-it-all,” but seems to imply someone who is more cheeky than obnoxious, especially since it is often used as a schoolyard taunt.

“Smarty” has been used since at least the mid-1800s to put down some who was too smart for their own good.

A description of the type appeared in an Ohio newspaper in 1938. “But the Smarty Pants breed is peculiar to the 20th Century. Unlike the common garden variety of Swell Heads, the Smarty Pants is not happily content with grabbing the spotlight for himself — he must kick someone else in the shin while so doing. It is not enough to boost his own stock — he must simultaneously belittle the other fellow’s.”

The “pants” part of the word is almost irrelevant, except perhaps to give the tone of talking down to a juvenile, or to emphasize “smarty.” There are similar expressions, such as “fancy-pants” and “scaredy-pants.” But perhaps “smarty” by itself was becoming over-used and boring.

SNIGLET

Another word for “neologism,” which describes a relatively recent word or phrase that has become popular.

The term “sniglet” was created by comedian Rich Hall on the 1980s HBO comedy series *Not Necessarily the News*. Each monthly episode had a segment on sniglets, which Hall described as “any word that doesn’t appear in the dictionary, but should.” In 1984, a collection of such words was published by Hall, titled *Sniglets*. This was followed by a “daily comic panel” in newspapers, four more books, a board game, and a calendar.

The board game instructions offer suggestions for creating a new sniglet, such as combining or blending words, changing the spelling of a word related to the definition, or creating new, purely nonsensical words.

Here are some examples:

- Aquadextrous: the ability to turn a bathtub faucet with your toes.
- Snackmosphere: the pocket of air found inside snack and/or potato chip bags.
- Chwads: discarded gum under tables and countertops.

- Flop corn: unpopped kernels left in a bag of microwave popcorn.
- Napjerk: a sudden convulsion of the body just before falling asleep.
- Profanotype: symbols used by cartoonists to replace swear words.
- Musquirt: the runny stuff that comes out of the mustard bottle before the mustard does.

People have been making up their own words since the days of woolly mammoths. I think writers should have their own set of sniglets. For example:

- Barfiage: the act of effortlessly “spewing” the perfect poem, short story, or chapter in one writing session. (In other words, “a miracle.”)
- Blockberry: the scary assistant who stands between you and your editor or literary agent every time you call
- Keybored: the act of aimlessly surfing the Web when you should be working
- Sarcastrophe, as in “The humor of this piece fell flat.”

SPILL THE BEANS

Divulge a secret by accident, or maliciously, and upset the situation. The earliest meaning of “spill” was “kill,” in common use in the 1300s. It has meant “divulge” since at least the 1500s.

Variations include: “spill the soup,” “spill your guts,” “spill blood,” and just plain “spill.” You might also spill the dirt, the dice, the dope, or the works.

The phrase, a synonym for “upset the apple cart,” is first found in print in the early 1900s, in the US. It’s often used in written stories and film, where policemen get suspects to “spill the beans.” Planning a surprise party can be difficult when friends are inclined to “spill the beans.”

It can be tempting to spill the beans when you have a delicious secret, but supposing you do, and they take root in a little hill and flourish? Is that dinner?

STILL WATERS RUN DEEP

“Still waters run deep” is a Latin proverb now commonly taken to mean that a placid exterior hides a passionate or subtle nature. Formerly, it also carried the warning that silent people are dangerous.

According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, the first mention of the proverb appeared in classical times as “the deepest rivers flow with least sound” in a history of Alexander the Great by Quintus Rufus Curtius. The earliest use in English sources goes back to 1400. The French have a proverb: “No water is worse than quiet water.”

In 1692, Roger L’Estrange included this version in his edition of fables under the title of *A Country-man and a River*, along with the interpretation that men of few words are dangerous: “A Country-man that was to pass a River, sounded it up and down to try where it was most fordable: and upon Trial he made this Observation on’t: Where the Water ran Smooth, he found it the Deepest; and on the contrary, Shallowest where it made most Noise. There’s More Danger in a Reserv’d and Silent, than in a Noisy, Babbling Enemy.”

I must dispute all that proverbial advice. I'm a very quiet person and I'm not at all dangerous. Despite being sorely tempted, I haven't drowned anybody yet.

STINKING RICH

Extremely, offensively, disgustingly rich.

In Old English, “stinking” meant producing an odor of any kind, pleasant as well as unpleasant. Soon, however, “stink” narrowed to mean “to give off a strong offensive smell” and, by the 1200s, took on the figurative meaning of simply “to be very offensive,” a sense still in use in such phrases as “My job stinks.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that “stinking” became a “vague epithet connoting disgust and contempt” in the 1200s, when one person might speak of another’s “stinking pride.” But it wasn’t until the 1800s that “stinking” became an intensifier meaning “offensively” in phrases such as “stinking drunk.”

“Stinking rich” is a 20th-century phrase. “Stinking,” as stated above, is merely an intensifier, like the “drop-dead” of drop-dead gorgeous, or the “stark-raving” of stark-raving mad. It has been used as an intensifier in other expressions, for example, “We don’t need no stinking badges.”

The earliest use of it in print appears to be from the Montana newspaper *The Independent*, November 1925.

SUNDOG

A “sundog” (parhelion) is a concentrated patch of sunlight occasionally seen about 22° to the left or right, or on both sides, of the sun. Sundogs are often white but sometimes quite colorful, looking like little pieces of rainbow.

Sundogs are caused by the refraction and scattering of light from plate-shaped hexagonal ice crystals either suspended in high, cold cirrus or cirrostratus clouds, or drifting in freezing moist air at low levels as diamond dust. They disappear as the sun rises.

A sun halo (also known as icebow, nimbus, or gloriole), a circle of light that creates a circle 22° wide around the sun, is a related phenomenon. Unlike sundogs, generally only seen when the sun is near the horizon, the halo is visible even when the sun is high.

“Parhelion” comes from Ancient Greek, meaning “beside the sun.” As for “sundog,” *The Oxford English Dictionary* says it is “of obscure origin.” It has been in use since the early 1600s. But there are some interesting suggestions.

In Abram Palmer’s book *Folk-etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions Or Words Perverted in Form Or Meaning, by False Derivation Or Mistaken Analogy*, sundogs are defined: “The phenomena of false suns which sometimes attend or dog the true [sun] when seen through

the mist.” The same source says, “dog is no doubt the same word as dag, dew, or mist as “a little dag of rain,” ignoring the fact that “dogging” is slang for “following.”

One suggestion is that the term arose from Norse mythology and archaic names — Danish: *solhunde* (sun dog), Norwegian: *solhund* (sun dog), Swedish: *solvarg* (sun wolf). In the Scandinavian mythology, constellations of two wolves hunting the sun and the moon, one after and one before, may also be a possible origin for the term.

In the Anglo-Cornish dialect of Cornwall, UK, sundogs are known as weather dogs. Aristotle referred to them as “mock” suns.

SWEET FANNY ADAMS

“Sweet fanny adams” is a euphemism for “sweet fuck all” and has been in use since at least the mid 1900s. It was originally used to express total downtime or inaction, then broadened to mean anything badly substandard, and now means “nothing at all.”

The “sweet fanny adams” phrase came from the murder of a girl child in England in August 1867. Eight-year-old Fanny Adams was murdered in Alton, England, by Frederick Baker, a 24-year-old solicitor’s clerk. He left her dismembered body in a field near the town. She was buried in the Alton cemetery. The inscription on the headstone indicates the intense feeling against the murderer:

“Sacred to the memory of Fanny Adams aged 8 years and 4 months who was cruelly murdered August 24th, 1867. Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul but rather fear Him who is able to kill both body and soul in hell. Matthew 10:28. This stone was erected by voluntary subscription.”

Naturally, the case caused enormous public concern and newspaper reports of the time concentrated on the youth and innocence of the victim. Everyone living in England at the time would have known the name of “sweet” Fanny Adams.

However, with typical grisly humor, sailors in the British Royal Navy began to use the expression to refer to unpleasant meat rations they were often served, likening them to the dead girl’s remains. Barrère and Leland recorded this usage in their *A dictionary of slang, jargon and cant*, 1889: “Fanny Adams (naval), tinned mutton.”

It wasn’t until later that “sweet Fanny Adams” came to mean “nothing.” The term “fuck all,” which also means “nothing,” probably dates to at least the early 1800s, although how long isn’t clear as it wasn’t recorded in print until the 1900s.

Walter Downing, an Australian soldier who fought in Europe in the First World War, wrote a glossary of WWI soldier’s slang called *Digger Dialects* in 1919. He is the first to record the link between F.A. (meaning “fuck all”) and Fanny Adams: “F.A., ‘Fanny Adams,’ or ‘Sweet Fanny Adams’ — nothing; vacuity.”

QUICK BITES

SCHMOOZE — Shoot the breeze, from the Yiddish *shomuesn* (1897).

SCRIPTITATION — Continual writing (which I wish I could do) (Scots, 1653).

SHAPE UP OR SHIP OUT — An ultimatum to someone to improve their behavior or face being made to leave. It originated in the US Navy in World War II as an admonition to a sailor that he must either come up to the Navy's standards or be transferred, perhaps to the brig. Returning World War II veterans brought the idiom home to civilian life.

SLUMGULLION — Originally, food that was liquid, semi-liquid, or muddy. Now it means a cheap or insubstantial meat stew. Mark Twain, in *Roughing It*, 1872, says, "Then he poured for us a beverage which he called 'Slum gullion,' and it is hard to think he was not inspired when he named it. It really pretended to be tea, but there was too much dish-rag, and sand, and old bacon-rind in it to deceive the intelligent traveler." US dictionaries suggest it may be a combination of slum, an old English term meaning slime, plus gullion, English dialect for mud or a cesspool. Charming!

SNICKLEFRITZ — A Pennsylvania Dutch term of affection for mischievous children

SOUND LIKE A BROKEN RECORD — To repeat the same words with little variation. This expression derives directly from the term involving polyvinyl record albums, where such a "broken" record would repeatedly skip back a moment to what was previously being played. (The term was inaccurate — usually such skipping was caused by debris on the disc.) The phrase was first recorded in 1940 and popular enough to be the title for several songs.

SOUR GRAPES — Saying something is awful simply because you can't have it. From *The Fox and the Grapes*, a fable by Aesop.



— T —

TAKE A POWDER

Leave quickly, sneak out.

Christine Ammer's *The Facts on File Dictionary of Clichés* (2006) says, "The origin of the expression is obscure, even though it is relatively recent (twentieth century). Since about 1600 a powder has meant "a hurry," possibly derived from the speed of gunpowder. This meaning persisted well into the 1800s, mainly in Britain. In the 1920s, though, in popular literature, characters departing in haste were said to take a "runout powder." P.G. Wodehouse used it in *Money in the Bank* (1942).

This was a popular expression in the US by 1925, part of gangster slang and hard-boiled fiction and meant to depart or escape, often to avoid a difficult situation. "Scram" was a synonym.

"Take a powder" was a common phrase as a doctor's instruction, commonly referring to headache remedies or purgatives, which came in the form of small envelopes of powder to be mixed with water. Between 1600 and 1900, "take a powder" seems to have been understood to refer almost exclusively to medicinal powders.

The "disappear" meaning of "take a powder" almost certainly arose as a shortening of the expression "take a runout powder," which appears in *Google Books* matches as early as 1914 and which became widespread in other subgenres of US slang by the early 1920s.

TAKE WITH A GRAIN OF SALT

To "take with a grain [pinch] of salt" is an idiom which tells you to be skeptical or take care not to interpret something literally because the source of the information may be unreliable or prone to exaggeration. Therefore, the information itself should be "seasoned" to adjust for that bias.

The expression is in print in English starting in the mid-1600s, though it is probably much older.

We inherited our modern English word "salt" from the Old English "sealt." The Latin word *salis* means both "salt" and "wit," so that the Latin phrase *cum grano salis* can be translated as "with a grain of salt" or "with a grain (small amount) of wit." However, modern scholars say there's no evidence in Latin literature of writers using salt as a figurative expression of skepticism.

The simplest explanation for the phrase is that salt will make dull food more exciting, or a tall tale easier to swallow, by sprinkling a bit of salt on it.

One account says the Roman general, Pompey, believed he could become immune to poison by ingesting small amounts, and he took this treatment with a grain of salt to help him swallow the poison. Here, salt is not the antidote, but taken merely to assist in swallowing the poison.

Salt plays a vital role in human life. Salt is not only a necessity but was also a symbol of worth and value. The phrase “to eat salt with” someone meant to enjoy their hospitality and friendship. Salt was also a metaphor for that which makes life worthwhile and interesting.

Random House Unabridged Dictionary says that the adjective “salty” means “piquant, sharp, witty.” It also means “racy, or coarse,” as in salty humor. Thus, we often describe someone as being salty, or as using salty language.

I use a lot of salty language when I stub my bare toe.

TALK A BLUE STREAK

“To talk a blue streak” means to speak rapidly and without stopping.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that the phrase originated in the US in the early 1700s and that it implies a flash of lightning in speed and vividness.

It may “imply” vividness, but I’ve heard a lot of fast talkers whose words quickly blurred into mind-numbing babble.

The word “blue” is often added to phrases, sometimes for emphasis or rhythm, but often there’s a story behind it. “Blue chip” as in blue-chip stocks, comes from the highest denomination of chips in poker.” Another phrase, “blue blood,” also means the best, or highest, social class, but it arose as a reference to white skin, transparent enough to reveal the blood-carrying veins beneath it.

“Blue in the face,” according to *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*, means being exhausted from anger, strain, or other great effort. It alludes to the bluish skin color resulting from a lack of oxygen, which might result from talking until one is breathless.

“Blue-collar” workers came from the blue denim shirts that factory workers used to wear.

We don’t know whether “swearing a blue streak” has any different origins from “talking a blue streak.” Some believe that the word “blue” here refers to bad language. However, swearing became part of the expression by 1847, as in a “blue streak” of oaths.

The titles *Blue Streak* or *Bluestreak* have been used for: music albums, comics, films, roller coaster rides, fictional robot superhero characters, video games, call signs, a British ballistic missile, a bus network, a rubber company, a New Zealand railcar, and a species of wrasse, which is a fish. Wikipedia says there are 600 species of wrasse.

“Blue blazes” originally referred to the fires of Hell, where brimstone burns with a pale blue flame.

So, what in blue blazes am I going to do with all those wrasse?

THAT'S ALL SHE WROTE

The phrase means that's all there is, it's finished, it's over, the end. It originated in North America, but the source is unknown.

A popular explanation says that it's the punch line of a tale about an American GI serving overseas in World War II. The GI is supposed to have received a letter from his sweetheart. He reads it to his colleagues: "Dear John." They tell him to go on. "That's it; that's all she wrote."

American researcher, Garson O'Toole, found three examples of "that's all she wrote" from 1942, but all were in civilian contexts, which pretty much squashes the idea that the idiom is from World War Two servicemen being dumped by Dear John letters.

Also, there's an example from a column in the Texas newspaper *The Brownsville Herald*, in June 1935: "No power except that of the legislature can change the rolls. The assessor-collectors do not have the power, the commissioners' courts do not have the power. That's all she wrote and it's final, the attorney general says in language much more eloquent and technical."

THE DARK SIDE

"The dark side" is the evil aspect of human personality or society, referred to in a lighthearted or comic context. The dark side is also, of course, the portion of Earth facing away from sunlight.

Figurative uses of the term go back hundreds of years and are found in such phrases as, "the dark side of life," "the dark side of human nature," "the dark side of the story," and so on.

A 1620 document titled *Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax* by Richard Sibbes, in a discussion about human nature, says, "These delight to be looking on the dark side of the cloud only."

The phrase became vastly more popular after the 1977 film *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*. The "dark side" is portrayed as the evil aspect of the underlying controlling power of the Universe (the Force). The *Star Wars* series demonstrated the classic "good versus evil" plots found in Hollywood cowboy films. The "bad guy" in *Star Wars* was the Dark Jedi, Darth Vader, who went over the top in the black hat department.

The US publication, *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, published this in 1973: "The shadow is described as the dark side of the personality or representing the original conception of evil in the world. The latter conception places the shadow in the collective unconscious."

Today, the use of "the dark side" in everyday language isn't taken very seriously. It has the same linguistic weight as the phrase "be afraid, be very afraid," which is never used in circumstances that are actually frightening.

"Come to the Dark Side" (often followed by "we have cookies") is a popular Internet phrase, meant to be a tongue-in-cheek catchphrase.

THE SKY IS FALLING

“The sky is falling” describes a hysterical or mistaken belief that disaster is imminent.

Henny Penny, usually known in the US as Chicken Little, is a European folk tale with a moral about a chicken who believes the world is ending. Versions go back more than 25 centuries.

The story is an example of folktales that make light of paranoia and mass hysteria. The best-known Western version concerns a chick that believes the sky is falling merely because an acorn falls on its head. The chick decides to tell the King and, on its journey, meets other animals which join in the quest. There are many endings. In the most familiar, a fox invites them to its lair and then eats them all. In others, all are rescued and finally speak to the King.

Part of the oral folk tradition, the story only began to appear in print in the early 1800s. John Greene Chandler, a Massachusetts illustrator and wood engraver, in 1840, published an illustrated book for children entitled *The Remarkable Story of Chicken Little*. In this American version of the old story, Chicken Little is frightened by a leaf falling on her tail.

In 1849, an English version was published as *The Story of Chicken-Licken* by Joseph Orchard Halliwell. In this story, Chicken-licken was startled when “an acorn fell on her bald pate” and encountered the characters Hen-len, Cock-lock, Drake-lake, Gander-lander, Turkey-lurkey, Goose-loose, Duck-luck, and Fox-lox.

A very early example containing the basic premise of the tale is some 25 centuries old and appears in the Buddhist scriptures as the *Daddabha Jataka*. In it, the Buddha, on hearing about some religious practices, comments that there is no special merit in them, but rather that they are “like the noise the hare heard.” He then tells the story of a hare disturbed by a falling fruit and thus believes that the earth is coming to an end. The hare starts a stampede among other animals until a lion halts them, investigates the cause of the panic, and restores calm.

The fable teaches the necessity for deductive reasoning and subsequent investigation. It is a warning not to believe everything one is told.

In these modern days, one fervently wishes that global warming alarmists would pay much more attention to the “deductive reasoning and subsequent investigation.”

THROW A MONKEY WRENCH INTO

When you “throw a monkey wrench into” something, you’re sabotaging or frustrating a project or plans. For example, you might say, “My boss just threw a monkey wrench into my plans for going away this weekend. He said I’ll have to work Saturday.” The British version of this phrase is “throw a spanner into the works.”

It’s not known what monkey wrenches have to do with monkeys. The word “monkey” has been used for various devices, from cannons to pile-drivers. Perhaps because monkeys could learn how to use such tools? Perhaps it’s because a wrench has an adjustable jaw, which makes it handy for manipulating a variety of objects and that’s something monkeys can do, too.

Throwing a monkey wrench inside machinery, thus damaging or destroying it, is industrial sabotage, and the use of the phrase in this way dates from the early 1900s or before. The term is also used metaphorically, as in the following example. From the *American Economics Review*, in 1918: “Mr. A. Paladini, one of the larger wholesale dealers ... threw a monkey wrench into the machinery of proposed fish distribution.”

THROW UNDER THE BUS

This idiom means to cause another person pain in order to save oneself or gain personal advantage. It means the brutal sacrifice of a loyal teammate, for often small or minor advantage. It offers a violent image of callously disposing of someone.

The phrase can be replaced by using the terms betrayal, double-cross, dupe, bamboozle, hang out to dry or sell out, to name just a few. Another synonym that comes to mind is scapegoating.

The earliest known usage of this phrase was in June 1982, in *The Times (London)*. However, since 2004, the phrase has been made popular by sports journalists and was picked up by the mainstream media during the US 2008 political primary season. It has often been used to describe the actions of various politicians distancing themselves from suddenly unpopular or controversial figures with whom they had previously allied themselves.

In *The Washington Post* in 1984, journalist David Remnick wrote an article about Cyndi Lauper, in which he said, “In the rock ‘n’ roll business, you are either on the bus or under it.”

The exact origin of “throw under the bus” is not known. William Safire quotes slang expert Paul Dickson, who traces it to sports, specifically the standard announcement by managers trying to get players to board the team bus: “Bus leaving. Be on it or under it.”

THUMBS UP

“Thumbs up” is a thumb signal, a common hand gesture achieved by a closed fist held with the thumb extended upward in approval or downward in disapproval.

The source of the thumb gesture is not certain, but several origins have been proposed.

Anthony Corbeill, a professor of classical studies, who extensively researched the practice, says “thumbs up” in ancient Rome was a signal to kill the gladiator while “a closed fist with a wraparound thumb” meant sparing him.

But, over time, an upraised thumb has come to symbolize harmony and kind feelings. Desmond Morris in *Gestures: Their Origins and Distribution* traces the practice back to a medieval custom used to seal business transactions. The old English saying was, “Here’s my thumb on it!” The two people involved each wetted a thumb and extended it, held upwards, until the two raised thumbs touched one another.

It has been suggested that during the Middle Ages, “thumbs up” was a signal from English archers preparing for battle that all was well with their bow, and they were ready to fight.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the earliest written instance of “thumbs-up” (with a positive meaning) as being from *Over the Top*, a 1917 book written by Arthur Guy Empey. Empey was an American who served in the British armed forces during World War I. He wrote: “Thumbs up is a Tommy’s expression which means ‘everything is fine with me’.”

Popularization in the US is attributed to World War II pilots, who used the thumbs-up to communicate with ground or aircraft carrier crews, prior to take-off. In scuba diving, the thumbs-up gesture is a specific diving signal given underwater, in which the diver indicates that he or she is about to stop his or her dive and ascend.

On the Internet, the thumbs up gesture is shown as an icon and means “like,” or approval. Hitchhikers in the West traditionally use a thumb gesture to solicit rides from oncoming vehicles.

However, its perceived meaning varies significantly from culture to culture. The sign has a pejorative meaning in parts of West Africa and, in some of the Middle Eastern countries including Iraq and Iran, the sign is equivalent to giving the middle finger.

TICKLED PINK

“Tickled pink” is derived from the 1600s meaning of “tickle” which is to give pleasure or gratify. The word “pink” is, no doubt, derived from the fact that one’s face may turn pink with the rosy glow of pleasure.

Synonyms: delighted, pleased, thrilled, overjoyed.

The use of “tickling” to mean pleasure is represented in the following quotes.

— Samuel Hieron, *Works*, 1617: “Well might they haue their eares ticled with some pleasing noise.”

— Rollin’s *Ancient History*, 1734: “Eating in Egypt was designed not to tickle the palate but to satisfy the cravings of nature.”

— *St. Nicholas* (magazine for boys and girls), 1907: “I’m tickled to death to find some one with what they call human emotions.”

But the phrase “tickled pink” does not appear to have originated until the early 1900s.

It is first seen in print in a 1910 piece published in the Illinois paper *The Daily Review*: “Grover Laudermilk was tickled pink over Kinsella’s move in buying him from St. Louis.” Because the expression was included in a newspaper article, the writer would have assumed readers were already familiar with it, meaning it may have been a popular phrase before appearing in print.

Perhaps we could apply the phrase to someone coming from a seaside holiday with a sunburnt face. But it would probably be more accurate to say, “peeling pink.”

TIE ONE ON

To “tie one on” means to get drunk.

In *The Wordsworth Book of Euphemisms*, Eric Partridge suggests this expression is derived from “hang one on” (c 1935), which originated in the US. Maybe it’s where “hangover” came from.

Some sites claim that “tie one on” dates to the wild west in the US, in the 1800s, where a cowboy would have to tie up his horse to a hitching post before he could go into the saloon and get drunk. I think that’s stretching much too hard for a connection.

Wikipedia says that to “tie one on” means to drink for the purpose of getting drunk, especially when one is currently still drunk or hungover from a previous drinking session, thus having something to “tie one on” to. I think that’s also stretching too hard.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* compares “tie one on” to the British slang phrase “tie a bun on,” also meaning “to get drunk.” This phrase appeared around 1901. The theory said that being able to walk with a bun balanced on your head was a way of proving you were sober, much like walking a straight line today. It continued with this explanation: if you were drunk, you would tie the bun to your head so it wouldn’t fall off. If you fell down, maybe the bun served as a pillow.

There is, however, another US phrase, appearing around the 1940s, that means to get drunk: “tie a bag on.” Partridge’s *A Dictionary of Slang* lists “Bag: a pot of beer, from 1887.” The search continues to the phrase, “get/put (one’s) head in a bag,” probably from horses’ nose bags.

It’s not a big stretch to connect a horse’s feed bag to someone drinking out of a pot of beer as if it were a feed bag tied around his neck. This seems confirmed by the expression “in the bag,” used to mean drunk, also “half in the bag” (1920s) and “have a bag on” (1940s and still in use).

We always tend to abbreviate phrases and words. “Tie one on” is easier to say than “tie a bag on,” especially if you’re already half in the bag!

TO CARRY A TORCH

The idiom “to carry a torch” (for someone) means to love or to be romantically infatuated with a person, especially when such feelings are not reciprocated.

The torch is a common emblem of both enlightenment and hope. Thus, the Statue of Liberty, actually *Liberty Enlightening the World*, lifts her torch. However, crossed reversed torches were signs of mourning on Greek and Roman funerary monuments. A torch pointed downwards meant death, while a torch held up symbolized life, truth, and the regenerative power of flame.

Today we use the phrase most often in the romantic sense. A “torch song” is typically a sentimental love song in which a female singer laments an unrequited love. The lines refer to the one who got away, and now the singer is left alone, heartbroken.

Music historian Ted Gioia writes, “Others...have tried to link the phrase back to the torches carried by ancient Greek revelers at the wedding processions.”

On the night of the wedding, a torch made of hawthorn twigs was lit in the fire of the bride’s former home to light a new fire in the hearth of her new home. There is no agreement on who actually held the torch. Some say the bride, others the bride’s mother, still others say that three young boys accompanied the bride, two holding her hands and the third leading the way, carrying the torch himself.

The torch was said to have symbolized the newly formed connection between the two households. Like today’s bouquet-throwing tradition, the bride flung the torch into the crowd. Despite the danger of being singed or burnt, catching the torch was said to grant its new possessor a long life.

TOMFOOLERY

“Tomfoolery” means playful or silly behavior. The *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* defines “tomfool” as, “A clumsy, witless fool, fond of stupid practical jokes.”

“Tomfoolery” is also Cockney rhyming slang for jewelry. Like most rhyming slang it then gets shortened to tom. For example: “That’s a nice bit of old tom she’s got round her neck.” However, also shortened to tom is another more basic piece of Cockney rhyming slang, a “tom tit,” meaning a bowel movement. You can translate those two words into the appropriate slang word for yourself.

Tom Fool starts appearing in the historical record early in the 1300s in the Latinate form *Thomas fatuus*. The name “Thomas” was a generic term for an ordinary person, much the same way as we use the phrase “Tom, Dick or Harry.” *Fatuus* is the Latin word for stupid or foolish and from it has come “fatuous” and “infatuate,” among others.

The *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* tells us that back in medieval times it was considered great sport to watch the antics of insane people in asylums like Bedlam in London. The nicknames “Tom o’ Bedlam” and “Tom Fool” were often used for male inmates who were favorites of the audience.

Around the 1600s, the character of Tom Fool shifted from being a stupid or half-witted person to that of a fool or buffoon. He became a character who accompanied morris-dancers or formed part of the cast of various British mummers’ plays performed at Christmas, Easter, or All Souls’ Day.

TONTINE

A “tontine” is an investment plan for raising capital, devised in the 1600s and relatively widespread in the 18th and 19th centuries. Louis XIV of France used tontines to save his ailing treasury and to fund municipal projects.

Each investor pays a sum into the tontine and receives annual interest on the capital invested. As

each investor dies, his or her share is reallocated among the surviving investors. This process continues until the death of the final investor, and then the scheme is wound up. Each subscriber receives only interest; the capital is never paid back; it reverts to the state.

In a later variation, the capital devolves upon the last survivor, thus dissolving the trust and potentially making the survivor extremely wealthy. This version has often provided the plot device for mysteries and detective stories. Questionable practices by US life insurers in 1906 led to the Armstrong Investigation restricting some forms of tontines. Nevertheless, in 2017, The New York Times reported that tontines were getting fresh consideration as a way for people to get steady retirement income.

The investment plan is named after Neapolitan banker Lorenzo de Tonti, who is popularly credited with inventing it in 1653. Subsequently, many tontines were formed. By the end of the 18th century, the tontine had fallen out of favor as a revenue-raising instrument with governments, but smaller-scale and less formal tontines continued to be arranged between individuals or to raise funds for specific projects.

Tontines were eventually banned in Britain and the US, because there was far too much incentive for subscribers to bump each other off to increase their share of the fund, or to become the last survivor and so claim the capital.

In *4.50 from Paddington* (1957), a Miss Marple murder mystery by Agatha Christie, the plot revolves around the will of a rich industrialist, which establishes a settlement under which his estate is divided in trust among his grandchildren, the final survivor to inherit the whole. The settlement is described, inaccurately, as a tontine.

I will continue to put my money under the mattress.

TOP NOTCH

“Top notch” means excellent.

This phrase originated in the US and, eventually “the tops” came to mean the same thing. The British term is “topping.”

The earliest example may be from an advertisement in the *Huron Reflector* of Norwalk, Ohio, dated 29 April 1845: “J. WHYLER Has just arrived from the Great Emporium, with a Tremendous Cargo of Spring and Summer Goods, Which he is now unloading at his Old Stand in Norwalk — consisting of the choicest selections he ever made — the top notch of Fashions and Patterns — and an extensive variety of DRY GOODS, to suit his Old Customers and every other person who will give him a call.”

We don’t know how the phrase originated. One can assume that notches or notching played a part, and that reaching the top notch was a desirable result, but there are no clues to point us in the right direction.

The notches might well be a scoring system in a game. Another idea is that it has to do with cutting notches in a log to create a primitive ladder. The phrase could have come from the Wild West, when a man used to cut a notch on his belt when he killed someone. But if that is true, did a “top” notch mean the meanest hombre in town?

Wherever the phrase came from, it’s popular. Wikipedia says it’s been used for titles of songs, a pulp magazine, and a hill in Herkimer County, New York. Oh yes, and a variety of green beans.

TOUCH AND GO

One meaning of this phrase is to briefly touch on something and then go on to something else. But these days we usually take “touch and go” to describe a risky, precarious, or delicate state of things, where the slightest change could prove disastrous. We might say of a heart operation that it was touch and go whether the patient would live.

Apparently the first use of “touch and go” in print appeared in *Seven Sermons Before Edward VI*, published in 1869. This publication is a transcript of sermons preached in 1549 to Edward VI by the English cleric, Hugh Latimer. Latimer began by saying that he intended to merely touch on the things he wanted to say and then to enlarge on them later.

Latimer's approach seems much like the one I’ve heard recommended for writing articles. “First you tell the readers what you are going to tell them, then you tell them in detail, and then you finish up by telling them again, in the form of a summary.”

The meaning “precarious situation” was also used. In the memoirs of the Scottish clergyman Ralph Wardlaw, published in 1815, a letter includes these words: “‘Twas touch and go — but I got my seat.”

Robert Claiborne, in *Loose Cannons and Red Herrings*, says, “(The phrase) Dates back to the old days of stagecoaches, whose drivers were often intensely competitive, seeking to charge past one another, on narrow roads, at grave danger to life and limb. If the vehicle’s wheels became entangled, both would be wrecked; if they were lucky, the wheels would only touch and the coaches could still go.”

All over the world, drivers think, “It’s touch and go whether I get through that amber light in time.” Crash.

TURNKEY

“Turnkey” has two meanings. The first, known from about 1647, is a person in charge of the keys of a prison. The second, known from the 1920s, is used to describe something that is “complete and ready to be used.”

Turnkey is commonly used in the home construction industry. If a contractor builds a “turnkey” home, he completely finishes the structure. The purchaser simply has to turn the key to the front door and walk into a house ready for occupancy.

Turnkey is also used to advertise the sale of an established business, including all the equipment necessary to run it. An example is the creation of a “turnkey hospital,” which would be a complete medical center with installed medical equipment.

In the technology industry, “turnkey” describes pre-built computer packages which include everything needed to perform a certain type of task (e.g., audio editing) and are put together by the supplier and sold as a bundle. A website with pre-made solutions and some configurations is called a turnkey website.

Turnkey real estate also refers to an investment property which is complete and producing a stream of income, like an apartment block.

It follows, then, that a frozen Thanksgiving TV dinner could be called a turnkey turkey.

QUICK BITES

TICKETY-BOO — Fine, okay, all correct. May have originated with the Hindi phrase “tikai babu,” which is what your Indian servant might have said when you told him to bring ‘round the Bentley during the Raj. (1920s)

TINTIDDLE — A witty retort that you think of too late.

TOMMYROT — Foolishness, nonsense, pretentious or silly talk or writing. In 1700s military English, “tommy” was a nickname for the poor-quality bread doled out to soldiers as part of their rations. “Tommy-rot” was rotten bread, and, because it was worthless and useless, eventually came to mean “nonsense” in Victorian slang. “That’s a load of tommy rot” is used to describe poor quality goods or stupid ideas.

TOUGH TITTY — A sarcastic way of saying “Tough luck!” meaning, “Too bad; stop complaining and deal with it!” The complete saying is roughly, “Tough titties said the kitty, but the milk is mighty fine!” “Tough” has meant “hard luck” since the 1870s, with tough luck first being recorded in 1890, tough titty in 1929, and tough shit in 1946. The last was probably in use much earlier but wasn’t recorded until changes in attitudes after World War II began to allow such terms in print.

TWEE — Excessively quaint, pretty, sweet, or sentimental. It appears to have developed from “tweet,” not the noise a bird makes, but a childish attempt at saying sweet. (Early 1900s)



— UVW —

UP

The basic definition of “up” is “toward a higher place or position.” But it would be difficult to define in all the ways it’s used: adverb, preposition, adjective, noun, or verb.

Examples of how we use “up”:

- we wake up in the morning (and bed down at night)
- we speak up (or talk down)
- we bring up a topic at a meeting
- officers are up for election
- a speech may take up to an hour
- the secretary must write up a report
- we call up our friends
- we brighten up a room
- we polish up the silver and clean up the kitchen
- we warm up the leftovers
- we lock up the house
- we fix up the old car
- we stir up trouble
- we line up for tickets
- we sign up for a course
- we work up an appetite
- we think up excuses
- we dress up (and dress down)
- a drain gets stopped up, so must be opened up
- we open up a store in the morning, and close it up at night
- sometimes we’re mixed up, then things clear up
- we look up information (and write it down)
- a word may have up to thirty definitions
- we write up a list, which may take up a lot of time
- sometimes we’re up to it, sometimes not
- some people never give up
- we may wind up with many goals
- it’s clouding up or clearing up
- the earth soaks up water until things dry up
- people crack up over good jokes
- we mess up, then we tidy up
- we also screw up, then we ‘fess up
- what you do is up to you

But my time is up, so I’ll wrap this up and shut up.

UPPER CRUST

There are two meanings for “upper crust.” It may be the topmost layer of a loaf of bread, a pastry dish, or other food item with a hardened coating, or the Earth’s surface. It wasn’t until the 1800s that the phrase was used to mean upper class people, and also the human head or a hat.

One tall tale suggested that a loaf of bread was divided according to status. Lowly workers got the burnt bottom of the loaf, the family got the middle, and guests got the top, or “upper crust.”

Here’s how Thomas Chandler Haliburton put it in his 1838 *The Clockmaker; or the sayings and doings of Samuel Slick of Slickville*: “It was none o’ your skim-milk parties, but superfine uppercrust real jam.”

The earliest example of the term meaning the aristocracy is in *Slang: A Dictionary of the Turf*, by John Badcock, 1823: “Upper-crust — one who lords it over others, is Mister Upper-crust.”

UPSET THE APPLE CART

Create a difficulty or spoil carefully laid plans.

This phrase is first recorded by Jeremy Belknap in *The History of New Hampshire*, 1788: “Adams had almost overset the apple-cart by intruding an amendment of his own fabrication on the morning of the day of ratification” [of the Constitution].

In the 1800s “apple cart” was wrestlers’ slang for the body and “down with his apple cart” meant to throw a man.

One theory as to the origin says the Romans had a similar expression “Perii, plastrum perculi” — “I am undone, I have upset my cart.”

A simpler theory suggests that it refers to farmers, who bring to town apple carts loaded with fresh apples for sale. A clumsy person comes along and upsets the cart, spilling all the apples.

VIRTUE SIGNALING

Say and do things to look good in the eyes of others.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, virtue signaling is “the action or practice of publicly expressing opinion or sentiments intended to demonstrate one’s good character or the moral correctness of one’s position on a particular issue.”

Often the term is characterized by the signaler’s desire to show support for a cause without acting to support it. An important characteristic of virtue signaling is that it rarely costs anything.

Politicians often make statements to impress the public, such as saying he wants to raise the minimum wage only to pretend caring about those in that pay bracket. And then will probably do nothing about it.

The origin is often credited to journalist James Bartholomew in *The Spectator* in 2015.

Expressions of moral outrage may often be mere “virtue signaling” — feigned righteousness intended to make the speaker appear superior while condemning others. But sometimes these expressions do arise from genuine outrage.

Let’s try a little “vice signaling.” At least it’s honest!

WAKE

As a noun, “wake” means a death vigil, a social gathering to pay one’s respects to the departed and give family members a chance to adjust to the loss before the corpse is placed in the ground.

The practice of holding a wake for the dead arose at least partly from the fear of burying them prematurely. A Celtic pagan wake was one in which the corpse was placed under a table on which liquor was provided for the watchers. Any Celt who didn’t wake up and smell the ale was dead indeed.

While a wake is now meant simply to honor the dead person, wakes were once wild and unrestrained, for they had to be fit to “wake the dead,” if that was possible. Such a ceremony is a prominent part of death rituals in many cultures. It allows time for the living to express their emotions and beliefs about death.

Modern wakes are often performed at a funeral home. In the US and Canada, it is synonymous with a viewing. Because death is potentially frightening and there are many taboos surrounding it, wakes are now often low-key occasions.

The wake is often seen as a method of signifying to departing spirits that they must henceforth find a new life for themselves. But the ceremony is also intended to confuse ghosts and stop them from finding their way back to the land of the living.

WEASEL WORDS

“Weasel words” are words meant to make a statement sound more legitimate and impressive, but which are meaningless. Weasel words give the impression of taking a firm position while avoiding commitment to any specific claim.

Weasel words are often sloppy intensifiers: significantly, substantially, reasonable, meaningful, compelling, undue, clearly, obviously, manifestly, if practicable, rather, duly, virtually, quite.

“Weasel” comes from an ancient Indo-European word denoting a slimy liquid or poison. Recently, “weaselly” has come to mean devious and evasive with overtones of malice.

Author Stewart Chaplin explained the phrase in an article about political platforms in a 1900 issue of *The Century Magazine*: “weasel words are words that suck all the life out of the words

next to them, just as a weasel sucks an egg and leaves the shell.”

The verb “to weasel” means “to renege on a promise,” usually for some cowardly reason. In prison slang, it refers to an informer. Why the weasel has acquired a cowardly reputation is not known; it is a bold little beast.

The phrase “weasel words” first appeared in print in the US in the early 1900s. It’s possible that Roosevelt coined the expression but there’s no proof of that.

Weasel words are rampant in the corporate environment: any time a document uses words like positioning, mission, vision, passion, incentivizing, or synergy, you should slow down and read carefully. Too often, the right question is, “What are they trying to hide?”

Weasel words in conversation often indicate that the speaker (or writer) is acting like a weasel. They’re being slippery; they’re bending the truth; they’re wriggling out of a situation or trying hard to make sure that they don’t get into “a situation” in the first place.

One of the greatest weasel words is “only.” What is the difference between pork bellies that are \$9.95 a lug and pork bellies that are only \$9.95 a lug? The word “only” suggests that the price is low. “Almost” is almost as slippery as only.

Another favorite expression of advertisers is “up to,” as in “This pen lasts up to 20 percent longer.” So, 20 percent longer than what?

Writing advice gives these as weasel words and phrases: almost, a little, kind of, sort of, very, great, somehow, seem, suddenly. The advice continues with, “Nothing happens ‘somehow.’ It happens because you wrote it. Take responsibility!”

WET BLANKET

Figuratively, a “wet blanket” is a person or object that destroys other people’s enjoyment.

In other words, a party-pooper (whether or not there's a party involved), a spoilsport, a killjoy, or Joe Btfsplk, the unluckiest denizen of Dogpatch, featured in the newspaper comic strip *Lil' Abner* (1934 – 1977). Mr. Btfsplk was such a killjoy that he travelled with his own black cloud overhead. Add to this list Eeyore, the always-pessimistic donkey from A.A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories.

The expression goes back at least to the 1660s, according to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, when it referred to a simple way to fight small fires. One used a thoroughly soaked blanket to smother a sudden flare-up, especially in confined spaces.

More than 200 years later, the term appears in an article titled “Wet Blankets,” in an 1871 issue of *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine*, where it is clearly employed in the figurative sense that we’re familiar with today.

The phrase is, however, still being used in the original sense. “Weapons emplacements should use a wet blanket canvas, or cloth to keep dust from rising when the weapon is fired.” From *Combined Arms Operations In Urban Terrain*, Department Of The Army, Washington, DC, 28 February 2002.

WHAT IN THE SAM HILL!

The exclamation “Sam Hill!” (also “What the Sam Hill!” or “What in the Sam Hill!”) originated in early 1800s America as a euphemism for “Hell!” In other words, a minced oath. *The Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* says the exclamation “was very popular with frontiersmen, especially when they needed to clean up their language in the presence of ladies.”

The Oxford English Dictionary says the origin of the expression is not known. The first published reference to it in the *OED* is from the Aug. 21, 1839, issue of the *Havana (NY) Republican*: “What in sam hill is that feller ballin’ about?”

The fact that the beginning letters of the two words are printed as lower-case in the newspaper suggests that the expression didn’t originally refer to a real person.

But, if it does refer to a person named Sam Hill, Wikipedia offers several suggestions as to the origin of the phrase. These include a store owner in Prescott, Arizona; a surveyor connected with the Keweenaw Peninsula; a politician in Guilford, Connecticut; and a former adjutant general of Kentucky, who was called on to investigate the Hatfields and McCoys family feud in 1887.

WHEN PIGS FLY

An impossible thing, something that will never happen. It’s often used humorously or sarcastically, especially as a comment on extreme ambition or over-the-top self-assurance. A similar phrase is, “when hell freezes over.”

The original version of the succinct “pigs might fly” was “pigs fly with their tails forward,” which is first found in a list of proverbs in the 1616 edition of John Withals’s English-Latin dictionary, *A Shorte Dictionarie for Yonge Begynners*.

Pigs have stood the test of time as the favored image of an animal that is particularly unsuited to flight. They are simply too bulky and too “earthy” to flit through the sky. The *Illustrated Times* referred to them in August 1855: “...pigs might fly. An elephant, too, might dance on the tight-rope.”

In Finnish, the expression is “when cows fly.” In French, the most common expression is “when hens will have teeth.”

One famous incidence of the phrase appears in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. “I’ve a right to think,” said Alice sharply, for she was beginning to feel a little bit worried. “Just about as much right,” said the Duchess, “as pigs have to fly...”

One origin story comes from a book by John Winthrop, an English Puritan explorer who settled in Massachusetts in 1630 and told his story in *The History of New England, 1630-1649*: “In this year one James Everell, a sober, discreet man, and two others, saw a great light in the night at Muddy River. When it stood still, it flamed up, and was about three yards square; when it ran, it was contracted into the figure of a swine: it ran as swift as an arrow towards Charlton, and so up and down about two or three hours.”

One wonders what they were drinking. Or smoking.

The image has been popular in Cincinnati, Ohio, which was a big pork packing center in the 1800s and earned the name “Porkopolis.” To celebrate the city’s bicentennial in 1988, Andrew Leicester designed a new waterfront for the city, which included four flying pigs atop smokestacks, to represent the pigs who gave up their lives in the town’s slaughterhouse. The Flying Pig Marathon is hosted by Cincinnati each year and, in 2000, the city center was decorated with pig sculptures in a project called the Big Pig Gig.

The most famous flying pig is the inflatable one seen at Pink Floyd concerts. In 1976, artist Jeffrey Shaw built the prop for the album cover of the 1977 album, *Animals*. The pig made news when it broke free of its moorings during the photo shoot and was seen by airline pilots. Would that make a pilot stop drinking? Or start?

Since I’m a writer, my favorite story is about American author John Steinbeck, who was told by his professor that he would be an author when pigs flew. When Steinbeck eventually became a novelist, he started to print every book he wrote with the insignia *Ad astra per alas porci* (to the stars on the wings of a pig). He sometimes added an image of a flying pig, called “Pigasus.”

WILLY-NILLY

“Willy-nilly” has two meanings. The first is “whether it is with or against your will,” and the second, which we tend to use today, is “in an unplanned, haphazard fashion.”

The *Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology* says it’s a contraction of “will I, nill I” or “will he, nill he.” The phrase dates back at least a thousand years, with the earliest known version being the Old English text, *Aelfric’s Lives of Saints*, circa 1000 CE.

Shakespeare used it in *The Taming of the Shrew*, in 1596. Petruchio says to Katharina:

“Thus in plain terms: your father hath consented
That you shall be my wife; your dowry ’greed on;
And, Will you, nill you, I will marry you.”

The early meaning of the word “nill” is key. In early English, “nill” was a contraction of “ne will,” the opposite of “will.” The willing and unwilling expressions were combined into a shortcut, willy-nilly. Later, the shortcut also appears as “nilly willy” or “willing, nilling,” or even, in a perhaps pompous version, “william nilliam.”

The “undecided” meaning of the expression seems to have given birth to the later “shilly-shally.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Sir Walter Besant's novel *The Orange Girl*, 1898: "Let us have no more shilly shally, willy nilly talk."

But there is a third meaning for "willy-nilly." Several years ago, the *Washington Post* asked readers to take any word from the dictionary, alter it by adding, subtracting, or changing one letter and supply a new definition. For example: "Intaxication," meaning euphoria at getting a tax refund, which lasts until you realize it was your money to start with.

Here's my favorite: Willy-nilly: impotent.

WISHBONE

The "wishbone" is a bird's furcula ("little fork" in Latin), formed by the fusion of two clavicles. It's important to flight because of its elasticity and the tendons that attach to it.

Humans have used it for divination since the time of the ancient Etruscans. In John Russell Bartlett's 1859 *Dictionary of Americanisms*, Bartlett thoroughly describes this wishing-bone: "The bone, after being dried, is taken by two persons, who hold each shank between their forefinger and thumb, and then pull until it breaks, while at the same time wishing for something. The one in whose fingers the larger portion remains, it is said, will have his wish."

According to historians, the Etruscans believed that chickens were oracles and could predict the future using an odd ritual known as alectryomancy. A circle was drawn on the ground and divided into wedges, like a pie, each one representing a letter of the Etruscan alphabet. Food was scattered on the wedges and a chicken placed in the center of the circle. As the bird pecked at the food, watchers would note the sequence of letters that it pecked at, and the local priests would use the resulting messages to divine the future.

North Americans use the turkey wishbone to make wishes at various celebrations. The British might break those of geese, chickens, or other fowl. And, in British English, this wishbone was once called the merrythought.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* references English polymath John Aubrey's late 1600s folklore compilation, *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*. In a passage called Lotts, Aubrey writes: "Tis common for two to breake the Merrythought of a chicken-hen, or wood-cock, &c., the Anatomists call it the Clavicula; 'tis called the merry-thought, because when the fowle is opened, dissected, or carv'd, it resembles the pudenda of a woman."

We humans have unfused clavicles, known as collarbones. Wishbones have been found in most branches of the dinosaur family. So we're all related: chicken, human, dinosaur.

WITH FLYING COLORS

If you passed "with flying colors," you triumphed, succeeded with distinction, were victorious. "Sailing under false colors," on the other hand, means practicing deception or being misleading.

Both phrases are nautical and related to ship flags, also known as “colors.” Though the phrases began as nautical language, they were soon used figuratively to signify any kind of triumph.

Before now-common modern communication devices, a ship’s appearance on returning to port could signal how the crew had fared at sea. Ships that were victorious would sail into port with flags flying from the mastheads. But a ship that had been defeated would be forced to “strike her colors,” or to take them down, signifying her defeat.

Another phrase, “go down with flying colors,” meant that a crew fought until their ship sank. A variant of this phrase is, “Nail your colors to the mast.” If the flag was nailed onto the mast, it couldn’t be lowered, which meant the crew would not surrender.

Colors, or flags, were used to display allegiance to a nation or company. “Flying,” of course, refers to the unfurled flags’ position on the masthead.

Similarly, the phrase “sailing under false colors” was a reference to a tactic used by pirates to attack vessels to gain booty. If the pirates flew a friendly flag, the unsuspecting victim would allow the pirates’ ship to approach, giving them the chance to board and overcome the crew. Blackbeard famously repeated this process for two years.

Pirates preyed on commerce from the times of the ancient Phoenicians and Greeks until about 1825, when a concerted effort by the US and Britain finally destroyed their last strongholds.

QUICK BITES

UPSTART — A person who has risen suddenly to wealth or high position, especially one who behaves arrogantly.

WACKY — Amusing in a slightly odd way, absurd, eccentric, crazy; 1800s British slang, probably from the notion of being whacked on the head one too many times.

WACKO — A tad crazier than wacky.

WENCH — Young woman (c 1200s). An abbreviation of the obsolete *wenchel*, meaning child, servant, or prostitute. It came to mean mainly serving girls, such as one serving drinks in a tavern. For Shakespeare, a female flax-worker could be a flax-wench, flax-wife, or flax-woman.

WHEN HELL FREEZES OVER — Never (early 1900s).

WORD-HERDER — A skilled user of words, aka word herder.



— XYZ —

YADA YADA

“Yada yada” means boring or empty talk — a modern-day equivalent of ‘blah, blah, blah’ (early 20th century).

The phrase probably arose from yatter or yatata or yackety-yack, or yaddega. It might also come from the Norwegian expression *jada jada* which has a similar pronunciation and meaning. “Yatter, yatter” is Scottish English for “continuous chatter, rambling and persistent talk.”

Yet another variation is natter, from northern England dialect *gnatter*. Earlier, it meant, “nibble away.”

Stackhouse, an English language question-and-answer site, provides (among others) this explanation: “Yada Yada Yada is Yiddish in origin and goes back much further than the 1940s. Yada is the Hebrew word for knowledge *Yud-Dalet-Ayin*, literally ‘you know that you know that you know,’ meaning ‘I can skip over this part of the story because you already know how it goes.’”

The phrase “yadda yadda” was first popularized by the comedian Lenny Bruce in his stand-up bit *Father Flotsky’s Triumph*. It gained renewed popularity in the US in the late 1990s on the TV show *Seinfeld*, where it appears as a catchphrase.

Dory Previn released the album *Mythical Kings and Iguanas* in March 1971, which included the song *Yada Yada La Scala*:

Yada yada La Scala
yada yada yada yada yada
Let’s stop talking talking talking
wasting precious time
Just a lot of empty noise
that isn’t worth a dime
Words of wonder
words of whether
should we shouldn’t we
be together
Yada yada yada yada yada

That song is the perfect definition of chatter.

YOUR MIND’S EYE

Your “mind’s eye” is your visual memory or imagination. Examples of mental images include daydreaming, the mental visualization that occurs while reading a book, or used by athletes before a competition.

This ability to create mental pictures of things, people, and places that are absent from your visual field is important for problem-solving, memory, and spatial reasoning. This is useful for humans, but it's unlikely that animals can experience mental images.

The idea of having an “eye in our mind” first appeared in English in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*. However, the idea itself goes back at least to Cicero in the late 1300s.

The term probably became known through the work of Shakespeare. He uses it in the best-known of all plays — *Hamlet* (1602), in a scene where Hamlet is recalling his father.

About 2% of people, when the eyes are closed, see only darkness, and such lack of ability is called aphantasia. The other 98% can see colorful images, which can be expanded by hallucinogenic drugs. Aphantasia does not seem to prevent creativity, however. Many aphantasics are successful in creative professions.

Aphantasics, being unable to see in their mind's eye the appearances of people they know and places they've been, can forget what their loved ones look like. They may take photographs to preserve their memories. Meditation feels pointless because the lack of mental imagery already gives them a clear mind.

Visual (as well as auditory, olfactory, etc.) imagery has long been researched in psychology, and the cognitive and neurosciences. Mental imagery can sometimes produce the same effects as would be produced by the behavior or experience imagined.

The biological foundation of the mind's eye is not fully understood, but the rudiments are found in the deeper portions of the brain, where the center of perception exists. The pineal gland is a hypothetical candidate for producing a mind's eye. Rick Strassman and others have postulated that during dreaming, the gland might secrete an hallucinogenic chemical N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) to produce internal visuals when external sensory data is occluded. However, this hypothesis has yet to be completely supported with neurochemical evidence and plausible mechanisms for DMT production.

According to psychologist and cognitive scientist Steven Pinker, we can use real images along with mental images to put together completely new images, thus seeing how the world works without having to directly experience it.

In *The Mind's Eye*, Oliver Sacks tells the stories of people who can navigate the world and communicate with others in spite of losing the power of speech, the capacity to recognize faces, the sense of three-dimensional space, the ability to read, and the sense of sight. For all these people, the challenge is to adapt to a radically new way of being in the world.

Sometimes, when driving, my physical eyes are watching the road, but my mind's eye is visualizing a different scene. I try not to let myself do that; it's scary as hell to “come to” and not remember how I got halfway across town.

YOUR NAME IS MUD

If “your name is mud,” you’re in disgrace or unpopular.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines mud as “soft, moist, glutinous material resulting from the mixing of water with soil, sand, dust, or other earthy matter.” The word began to be used as early as the 1500s to refer to worthless or polluting substances. Later it was applied to people, in John Hall’s 1703 account of London’s low life, *Hell upon Earth*: “Mud, a Fool, or thick skull Fellow.”

Mud later began to be used as an intensifier. In the 1800s there are many examples of phrases like “as fat as mud,” “as rich as mud,” and “as sick as mud.” The ideas of decay and worthlessness meant that the association of “mud” with someone’s name became an insult.

There is a theory that the phrase “your name is mud” comes from Dr. Samuel Mudd, who supposedly aided in the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. Dr. Mudd gave medical help to John Wilkes Booth, who broke his leg while escaping after shooting Lincoln in 1865. Mudd was tried and convicted of conspiring with Booth, although the evidence against him was circumstantial. Many historians argue that he was innocent of murderous intent. He has since been pardoned.

But Dr. Mudd’s innocence is of no consequence when considering the origin of “your name is mud,” since the phrase was in general use long before Lincoln was assassinated.

“Mud” features in many phrases: “dragged through the mud,” “as clear as mud,” “mud sticks,” “happy as a pig in mud,” and “mud in your eye.”

It’s that last one I like. “Mud in your eye” is a toast and means somebody has opened a bottle of scotch.

ZERO-SUM GAME

Whatever is gained by one side is lost by the other.

ZIGZAG

To “zigzag” is to move by going first in one direction and then in another, and repeating the movements, as in: “We zigzagged through crowds of tourists.”

A zigzag might also be defined as a series of short straight lines, set at angles to one another and connected to form a continuous line, sometimes forming a regular pattern.

The origin of the term is unknown, though it seems to have come into English from Continental Europe. In 1706, the Dutch author Roelof Roukema published *Book of Medicine and Healers*. This contains the line (loosely translated): “some in the suburb of St. Germain move zig zag.” The German word ‘zickzack’ dates from around the same time. That usage referred to the fortifications of castles, the walls of which were often built in zigzag form.

Soon the term to begin to be used figuratively, in reference to any continual changes, as early as 1780.

Examples of zigzag use:

- Lightning and other electrical hazards.
- The trace of a triangle wave or a sawtooth wave.
- Pinking shears are designed to cut cloth with a zigzag edge, to lessen fraying.
- Zigzags are a basic decorative pattern used on pottery.
- The zigzag arch is an architectural embellishment.
- The stripe on Charlie Brown's famous yellow shirt.
- Zigzag stitch.

There is, apparently, a real Zig Zag Road in Liverpool, UK.



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Salmagundi
Salt of the earth
Sasquatch
Sallywag
Scarecrow
Scat
Schmooze
Scissors
Screwed, blued, and tattooed
Scriptitation
Sesquipedalian
Shake a leg
Shape up or ship out
Shebang
Shenanigans
Shit happens
Since Hector was a pup
Skedaddle
Skinflint
Skookum
Skulduggery
Slow as molasses in January
Slumgullion
Smart alec
Smart cookie
Ssmarty-pants
Snicklefritz
Sniglet
Sound like a broken record
Sour grapes
Spill the beans
Still waters run deep
Stinking rich
Sun dog
Sweet Fanny Adams

Take a powder
Take with a grain of salt
Talk a blue streak
That's all she wrote
The dark side
The sky is falling

Throw a monkey wrench into

Throw under the bus

Thumbs up

Tickety-boo

Tickled pink

Tie one on

Tintiddle

To carry a torch

Tomfoolery

Tommyrot

Tontine

Top notch

Touch and go

Tough titty

Turnkey

Twee

Up

Upper crust

Upset the apple cart

Upstart

Virtue signaling

Wacky and Wacko

Wake

Weasel words

Wench

Wet blanket

What in the Sam Hill!

When hell freezes over

When pigs fly

Willy-nilly

Wishbone

With flying colors

Word-herder

Yada yada

Your mind's eye

Your name is mud

Zero-sum game

Zigzag



Books by Lea Tassie

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover
Siamese Summers
Cat Under Cover
Cats & Crayons
Calico Cat Caper

Charger the Soldier
Charger the Weapon
Charger the God
The Missing Year
The Case of the Copycat Killer

Deception Bay
Deep Water
Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising
Red Blood Falling
Shockwave

A Clear Eye
Double Image
Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest
Walking the Windsong
Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail
Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?

About the book

Being the black sheep of my family, it seemed right to use a black sheep theme for my collections of weird English words and phrases. *Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail* contained comments on 355 words and phrases. *Baa Baa Black Sheep Have You Any Words?* contains 430, for a total of 785.

One thing I can say about creating these two books is that playing with the English language is a lot of fun. It's also non-fattening and inexpensive.

A quote often used in the world of writing is: To steal ideas from one person is plagiarism; to steal from many is research. Nobody knows for sure who said that. And I will admit that I stole every single one of the words in this book from *The Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*. Some words, such as “and,” and “the,” I stole several times.

Author Bio

Lea Tassie grew up on an isolated homestead in northern British Columbia. Now she lives and writes in the beautiful, temperate, Pacific Coast rainforest. Her fiction includes cat humor, science fiction, and mainstream novels. Her non-fiction deals in a light-hearted way with the weird words and phrases found in the English language.

